The Christmas Makers' Club

by

Edith A. Sawyer

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THE CHRISTMAS MAKERS' CLUB

"'NOW CHILDREN, WE MUST MAKE OUR PLANS.'"

(*See page 20*)

The Christmas Makers' Club

BY

EDITH A. SAWYER

Illustrated by

ADA C. WILLIAMSON

Of glad things there be . . . four;
A lark above the old nest blithely singing,
A wild rose clinging
In safety to a rock; a shepherd bringing
A lamb, found, in his arms,
And Christmas bells a-ringing.

Willis Boyd Allen

L. C. PAGE & COMPANY

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To
Margaret and Ruth
Dorothy and 'Nita

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THE CHRISTMAS MAKERS' CLUB

CHAPTER I

THE CLUB GATHERS FOR WORK AND PLAY

Didst thou never know
The joy of following the path untrod?
—Margaret E. Sherwood: Persephone.

"HOW I wish we had something new and interesting to do Friday afternoons!" said Elsa Danforth, a slim girl in a black coat, with a soft, wide black felt hat set back on the yellow hair which floated like a cloud of pale gold over her shoulders. Elsa was the tallest of the three girls who had hurried away from school together that gray mid-November afternoon. They were just now turning into Washington Avenue.

"It's too cold to play outdoors," said Betty White, dancing on ahead, her bag of school-books swung over her shoulder. Betty's brown eyes

danced like her feet, and so did the capes to her long blue coat and the wavy brown hair tied back with a bow of wide white ribbon.

"Isn't there something we can do?" asked Alice Holt, the youngest and smallest of the three, hurrying to keep up with the others.

"Play dolls or play school is all I can think of," said Betty. "O Elsa, we might go to your house and play with you!" she added, turning to Elsa. Betty had wanted to have a good look at the great house where Elsa Danforth lived with her grandmother. Betty had been in the house only twice, and then but for a few moments, since the Danforths came there in September.

"But —" began Elsa. Then she stopped; she could not bear to say that her grandmother had told her not to bring children home with her to play.

"I tell you what let's do," Alice exclaimed, before Betty could say anything. "Let's start some kind of a club, and have it meet Friday afternoons. We might have it a Christmas Club."

"Only grown-up people have clubs," objected Betty instantly; she was still thinking of what fun it would be to go all over the Danforth house.

"We could have a club, though we are children," said Elsa eagerly. "I am almost twelve years old."

"I am only eleven," said Betty, who, however, was nearly as tall as Elsa.

"And I am only ten and a half," said Alice, running a little ahead, her blue eyes very wide open with interest. "But it truly doesn't matter how old we are; we all play together and we like the same things." Alice was a quaint little figure. She looked like a rather shabbily dressed doll, with her blue eyes and pink cheeks, her thick blue coat which came just to her knees, and a shaggy blue tam-o'-shanter, below which hung very smooth hair cut short around her neck.

"If we have a club, where will it meet?" asked Elsa.

"It can come to my house," said Betty, beginning to be interested, and dancing on ahead, backward now.

"It can meet at my house, too, though I live rather far away," said Alice.

Elsa walked on slowly, behind the others. She alone did not offer to have the club meet at her home.

They were directly in front of Betty's home, a large and pleasant-looking house on this main avenue of the suburban town of Berkeley. "Come into my house and we will start the club now,"

urged Betty, running up the front steps. But she stopped as Elsa said: "I must go and ask grandmother if I can belong."

"O, of course she will let you," exclaimed Betty. But Elsa, with flying yellow hair, was already halfway home. So Betty and Alice waited on the top step.

In a very short time Elsa came running back and announced breathlessly: "Yes — I can belong — and I can stay till five o'clock." Her usually pale face was rosy from the haste, and her wide-brimmed hat had slipped down over her loose, fair hair.

It would be hard to find three girls more unlike than these three good friends who went hurrying into the house together. Elsa, the oldest, had a sensitive face and deep violet-gray eyes, which, with her soft, silky hair, gave her a delicate, almost flower-like look. Betty, next in age, was a lively, wide-awake girl with merry brown eyes and bright cheeks; she was always a leader, and sometimes a wilful one, in any fun or adventure. Alice — "Baby Alice," as Betty often teasingly called her — had softly rounded cheeks, big blue eyes, and a fair, high forehead. Alice was a dreamy, rather quiet child, but everybody loved her for her unselfish, affectionate ways.

Betty opened the hall door and went ahead through the wide hall. "Hang your coats and things here in the closet," she cried, taking off her overshoes, "and come on up to the nursery. We can have it all to ourselves."

Elsa's eyes shone with pleasure as she looked around the hospitable hall and at the huge fireplace where a bright fire burned. She always felt the homelikeness of the Whites' house the moment she came into it. It was so unlike her grandmother's house, where everything was stiff and stately.

Elsa especially loved the nursery, Betty's bedroom and playroom, for it had picture-paper of children resting under trees and of wandering brooks which led to other children and other trees; it had also a broad window-shelf filled with bright-blossoming geraniums, and above, a cage with three tiny East Indian strawberry-birds; and — best of all to Elsa — a row of dolls, large and small, on a long, chintz-covered window-seat between Betty's blue-and-white bed on one side and her dolls' house on the other. Indeed, Elsa loved Betty's room quite as much as Betty herself did.

Alice had never been in the room before. "O, what dear, lovely birds!" she exclaimed, clasping her dimpled hands and looking up with round, sur-

prised eyes at the three mites of birds, brown with red spots, red eyes and red beaks, and legs so thin and needle-like as to seem scarcely strong enough to support even the tiny bodies.

"They are the dearest things," said Betty enthusiastically. "Uncle John brought them to me from India. I am glad there are three of them, because if one dies there will be two left."

"But what if two die?" asked Alice anxiously.

That, however, Betty did not want to think of, so she said hurriedly: "Come on, let's decide about the club."

"What shall we name it?" asked Elsa, who had settled herself on the soft rug by the bedside, with one elbow on the window-seat so that she could better look at the dolls.

"The Friday Club," suggested Betty, who was sitting at the foot of the bed.

"I like 'Club of Three,'" said Alice, turning away from the strawberry birds with a little sigh of happiness.

"I don't like either of those names," said Elsa. "Why not call it the Christmas Club, if that is what it is going to be?"

"'Anybody can have a Christmas Club," objected Betty, tightening the white ribbon bow on her hair.

"Why not ask somebody to name it for us?" suggested Alice.

"No, we must name it ourselves, and keep the name a secret," came Betty's quick answer.

"Then let's choose one of us president, and let her name it," said Elsa, who had Betty's smallest doll in her lap now.

"All right," replied Betty, looking from Elsa to Alice, whose eyes were again fixed upon the birds. Then, because Alice was always peacemaker, Betty said: "I will choose Alice for president."

"And I will choose Elsa," said Alice quickly, looking around.

"I will choose Betty," said Elsa.

"Dear me!" cried Betty, jumping up so suddenly that the tiny brown-and-red birds began fluttering around their cage; "we are all president, and that means nobody is president, and we haven't any name either."

"I think we'd better give up the club," said Alice, seeing trouble ahead.

"It was you who wanted to start it, and now you are backing out, Alice," cried Betty, stamping her foot impatiently. The little birds had a panic of fluttering.

"I'm not backing out, only if we are going to

get into a fuss the first thing, we might as well give it up," said Alice wisely.

"Why not play dolls?" suggested Elsa, noticing that the hands of the blue-and-white clock on the shelf were pointing at four. Elsa did not have many chances to be with other children, and she did not like to have the time go so fast now.

"No, let's stick to the club," insisted Betty, reseating herself on the bed.

Just then Betty's mother came to the nursery door with a rosy-cheeked baby in her arms who looked like a smaller Betty. The white-capped nurse followed close behind.

"I am sorry to disturb you, children," said Mrs. White, after a pleasant word of greeting, "but Nurse has just brought baby in from out-of-doors, and she wants to put him in the nursery, as he is fretful, and watching the birds always quiets him. Take your friends down to the living-room, Betty."

"But, mother, we are just starting —" began Betty.

"Betty dear, remember not to argue when I ask you to do anything," murmured Mrs. White into her little daughter's ear, stooping to kiss her forehead.

Elsa and Alice were already at the nursery door,

looking with adoring eyes at the baby, who was stretching out his chubby hands toward the birds.

"We can stay in the living-room just as well, mother dear," said Betty, patting her baby brother's cheek affectionately and then quickly leading the way down-stairs.

The living-room had a low ceiling and diamond-paned windows. The large centre-table was covered with books, the chairs were deep and comfortable, and on the wide couch opposite the fireplace lay two great, sleek gray cats curled up, fast asleep.

"What are your cats' names?" asked Alice, who, not being a near neighbour, did not know so much of Betty's home and pets as did Elsa.

"Romulus and Remus," said Betty. "But we must talk about the club."

"I don't believe we are going to have any club," said Elsa, beginning to stroke the cats, who purred in lazy content, without opening their eyes.

"Then it is your own fault," exclaimed Betty, with a flash of temper.

"Why?" Elsa left off petting the cats and sat up very straight on the sofa.

"Because you give up so soon," replied Betty.

Elsa suddenly bent low over the cats until her golden hair hid her face, but she made no answer.

"I wish we had some one older to manage for us," sighed Alice, turning over the pages of a picture-book on the table.

"I tell you what we can do," cried Betty, jumping up from the black bearskin hearth-rug where she had settled herself momentarily. "We can ask Miss Ruth Warren to be in the club!"

"But will she want to be in a club with little girls?" asked Alice anxiously.

"I think she will," returned Betty.

"Perhaps she will be president," suggested Alice, who was a born peacemaker.

"Maybe she will name the club for us," put in Elsa, raising her head. The flash of sensitiveness had died out of her violet-gray eyes.

"Come on, then! Let's ask her now," said Betty; and in another moment the three girls had slipped on their coats and were running toward the Warrens' house.

The Warren family was a small one now; only Miss Ruth and a maiden aunt lived in the old homestead. There had always been some one for Ruth Warren to devote herself to, — first her mother, then her grandmother, next her father; and now the last of her older relatives, this aunt who thought herself so much of an invalid that she seldom came

down-stairs. Ruth's brothers and sisters had married and left the old home; but although Ruth had chosen to remain unmarried, she had a busy life and a happy one, with her home cares and housekeeping, and a large number of nephews and nieces to love. There was a touch of sunshine about her that made other people the happier for knowing her. She was pleasant, too, to look upon, for she had beautiful brown eyes and warm-toned yellow hair. She was girlish-looking, in spite of her thirty years, and she always wore soft, graceful, unrustling gowns.

She had just come, this afternoon, from a luncheon-party, and, finding that her aunt had a caller, she seated herself before the open fire in the library, trying to decide whether or not she would go to Mrs. Wharton's tea, at five o'clock. "I wish there were something more interesting to do," she said to herself; "luncheons and afternoon teas are all about alike."

Old Sarah, the family servant, appeared at the library doorway just then. "Well, Sarah?" said Miss Ruth, looking up at the tall, thin, spectacled woman, whose corkscrew-like curls were bobbing with her displeasure.

"Three little girls to see you," said Sarah, her lips screwing themselves tight together as if in ob-

jection to three little girls coming into the house. "And here they are, chasing right after me," she snapped out, moving to one side.

Betty, who felt quite at home here, had urged the other children into following Sarah to the library.

Miss Ruth rose quickly and went forward to meet them: "Come in, girls," she said, in a friendly voice. "I am glad to see you."

"You know Elsa Danforth?" said Betty, in a suddenly shy manner.

"Yes, indeed; Elsa is my neighbour, though she has never been in my house before," replied Miss Ruth, taking Elsa's hand into her cordial grasp.

"And this is our little friend, Alice Holt," said Betty, drawing blue-eyed Alice forward.

"Are you going somewhere?" asked Betty, almost before Miss Ruth had time to greet Alice. "You look all dressed up."

"No," said Miss Ruth, deciding instantly that she would not go to Mrs. Wharton's tea. "I have just come from somewhere. Take off your coats and sit down, girls."

"We want you to be in our club," began Betty.

"What kind of a club is it?"

"It is a Christmas Club, for play," said Betty.

"And work, too," put in Elsa, shyly, thinking

that their play alone might not interest grown-up Miss Ruth.

"Making Christmas presents especially," said Betty, feeling hopeful.

"For whom?" asked Miss Ruth. She had a way of making people feel comfortable, and she met the children's request so naturally that they were speedily losing their shyness.

"For our friends," said Betty.

"We might make things for the children at the Convalescent Home," suggested Alice, drawing her chair a little nearer.

"What is that?" asked Elsa.

"O, it's a big, big brick house about a mile from where I live," explained Alice eagerly; "and children are brought there from the city hospital — children who are getting cured, and they stay there sometimes a long, long while for the country air and the sunshine make them well again. Some of them are on crutches and have bandages all over them and some are fastened to boards." Alice had talked very fast, and she stopped now, quite out of breath.

"I shouldn't like to see them," said Betty, shrugging her shoulders.

"But they are all getting well, even though they

do have crutches and boards and bandages," continued Alice, her blue eyes shining with interest. "Mother takes us children over there once in a while; she says it is good for us, because it makes us more tender-hearted."

"I don't believe my grandmother would let me go," said Elsa, who had been leaning forward, listening intently, with her chin in the palm of her slim little hand. "Grandmother is particular about the children I associate with, and I suppose these are all poor children. I should just love to go, though," she added, with a long sigh.

"Wouldn't it be a good plan for our club to make things to give those little children?" asked Betty, growing more interested the more she thought about the children.

"The very thing!" said Miss Ruth. "Miss Hartwell, who is at the head of the Convalescent Home, told me only yesterday that about fifty children are there now. Of course the playthings wear out, and when the children go back to their homes, cured, they want to take with them the toys they have grown fond of. But what have you named your club?" asked Miss Ruth, turning to Betty.

"That's what we can't decide about," said Betty. "We want you to name it and be president."

"But this is such a great honour!" exclaimed Miss Ruth. Her brown eyes had a way of laughing, even when her face was sober.

"Now, Miss Ruth, — don't laugh at us, please," begged Betty, slipping her arm around Miss Ruth's neck.

"Why not name it the Christmas Makers' Club," suggested Miss Ruth, with serious eyes now, "— especially if you decide to make things for the convalescent children?"

"That's the very best name we could have!" cried Betty, jumping up and clapping her hands.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Alice, two dimples showing in her soft pink cheeks.

"It sounds like all sorts of interesting things," said Elsa, coming to Miss Ruth's side and timidly stroking her sleeve.

"We must keep it a secret, though. We mustn't tell the name to anybody," said Betty, perching herself on the arm of Miss Ruth's chair, at the other side. "People will have to know there is a club, but they mustn't know anything more than that."

"How will you keep your work a secret?" asked Miss Ruth.

"If you are our president, you might keep the presents we make," said Elsa.

"Please, O, please!" begged Betty and Alice in a chorus. "Please be president!"

Miss Ruth looked from one to another of the bright, excited faces, for a moment. "I will gladly be your president, and keep your work, — and do anything else you want me to," she said, finally.

Elsa's face flushed rosy with pleasure, and she gave little Alice a good hug. Betty dropped a warm kiss on Miss Ruth's hair and said: "Then come back with us now to my house, because I invited the Club to meet there first."

Ruth Warren was as good as her word: "I will go where the Club wants me to go," she said, rising. "First of all, though, let me give you some plum buns which Sarah made this morning."

"I know old Sarah's plum buns; they are as good as she is cross," said Betty, as Miss Ruth left the room.

"That's not very polite, Betty," said Alice.

"I don't care. I am not very polite, anyway," replied Betty quickly. "I tell the truth, though."

"That sounds as if you thought other girls didn't tell the truth!" exclaimed Elsa.

"It is pretty hard to, always," said Alice slowly. "I try to, but sometimes the fib slips out first, and then it's all the harder to get the truth out."

"Mother always catches me if I don't tell things straight," confessed Betty.

"Papa used to tell me that the only thing he wanted me to be afraid of was of not telling the truth," Elsa said, her face growing suddenly sad. Her father had died less than a year ago.

At that moment Miss Ruth came into the room with a large plateful of buns, — crisp and tempting and full of raisins, — and soon all three girls were eating with a relish, as children eat, just after school.

"Come!" said Betty, taking up her coat. "We ought to start."

Alice and Elsa obligingly put on their coats, but Ruth Warren saw that they hesitated, and Betty as much as the others: there was yet a goodly pile of buns left.

"Fill your pockets, girls," she said. "Sarah will be disappointed if you don't eat all the buns." So the three girls filled their pockets, and Alice said shyly: "I will take one to Ben if you don't mind. O, thank you!"

"Who is Ben?" inquired Ruth Warren, as with a dark red golf cape over her black lace gown, she started forth with the girls for Betty's home, —

Betty hanging upon one arm, while Elsa and Alice walked on the other side.

"Ben is my twin brother," Alice replied. "He's 'most always hungry; mother says boys always are."

"Three plum buns!" exclaimed Betty. Then she repeated in a comical, sing-song voice:

"Three plum buns!
One for you and one for me,
And one left over:
Give it to the boy who shouts
To scare sheep from the clover."

"But Ben doesn't scare sheep from the clover, — because we haven't any sheep," said Alice, very earnestly. "All we have is hens."

"O, Alice," cried Betty, "that is only poetry."

"You do have hens then, Alice?" asked Miss Ruth quickly, seeing the child's face redden.

"Yes, and Ben takes care of them, and he sells the eggs," answered Alice proudly.

"They have the loveliest place," said Betty, "a little hens' house, and they raise lettuce and radishes and all sorts of good things to eat."

"You see," cried Alice, feeling that some explanation was necessary, and running a little ahead in her eagerness: "father isn't very well, and he

is a teacher, and he had to go out West for his health, and we can't afford to go, too, and we all try to help earn money to help, because he doesn't have much money. Besides Ben's chickens, mother has a market-garden, and a hired man to help; and I help, too. Perhaps the Club will meet out at my house, sometimes."

"We will surely have at least one meeting there," said Miss Ruth, while Elsa's eyes danced with pleasant anticipations.

Betty hurried ahead, ran up the steps of her home and threw open the door, her heart swelling with hospitality. "O mother!" she exclaimed, for Mrs. White was just passing through the hall; "Miss Ruth is going to belong to our Club!"

"This is good of you, Ruth," said Mrs. White, greeting her neighbour cordially. "But you must not let the children trespass upon your time."

Betty looked up in dismay: had they been asking too much of Miss Ruth?

"It will be such a new and refreshing kind of Club that I shall enjoy it," said Ruth Warren reassuringly.

"It is good for us to dare to be children with children," said Mrs. White, stroking Elsa's soft hair and looking into the appealing violet-gray eyes

that always brought a thrill of sympathy into her heart for the motherless child.

Elsa, meeting the kind glance, said very earnestly: "We are going to call the Club —"

"O, Elsa, you mustn't tell! You will spoil it all," cried Betty impatiently.

"Forgive my little Betty for her interruption, Elsa," said Mrs. White, seeing the colour rush into Elsa's face. "Fault-finding is an easy trade, Betty. But I suppose you children will all enjoy your Club more if you keep the name and what you do as a secret."

Elsa looked up into Mrs. White's kindly face and wondered if Betty realized how fortunate she was in having such a mother, who understood so well what little girls wanted.

"We are going to make —" began Betty.

"There, Betty, who is telling now!" said Mrs. White laughingly. "I am afraid I shall be learning your secrets if I stay any longer," she added, turning away. "Be sure you don't let the children bother you, Ruth."

"No danger of that," was the quick reply. And already, indeed, Ruth Warren's face looked younger and happier. "Now, children, we must make our plans," she continued, when they were all in the

living-room. "It seems to me the meetings would better be at my house. You can come there on your way from school, and I will have everything ready, — our work and something to eat."

"That will be better than meeting here," said Betty instantly, "because the other children — Max and Janet — come home from the high school early and they might be around sometimes, and sometimes we should have to keep very quiet on account of the baby."

"It would be a little nearer our house, too," said Elsa, "and grandmother could see Miss Ruth's house from the window, and maybe I could stay later than five o'clock sometimes."

"And how would you like it, Alice?" asked Ruth Warren, turning to the fair-haired child who was usually the last speaker.

"O, I'd like ever and ever so much to have the Club meet at your house," said Alice eagerly. "Ben can call for me to go home."

"Then we have our name settled, and the place where we shall meet," said Miss Ruth. "Next we must decide what to give the Convalescent Home children for Christmas."

"Dolls!" cried Betty, from a big, square cushion on the floor.

"Dolls!" echoed Elsa, curled up on the wide sofa beside the two sleepy gray cats.

"Dolls, — different kinds, paper dolls and some rag dolls," said Alice, her shabby little shoes sticking out straight ahead from the depths of the chair she had chosen.

"Rag dolls!" Betty tossed her head scornfully.

"Yes, — rag dolls, please," urged Elsa.

"Some rag dolls, surely," said Miss Ruth; "one of my dearest dolls was a black Dinah with a red dress and yellow ribbons on her woolly hair, — a homely-dear doll my grandmother made for me."

"Did your grandmother make dolls for you?" asked Elsa in a low voice.

"Yes — but that was probably because somebody had made dolls for her when she was a little girl," explained Miss Ruth.

"Dolls, then, it's going to be," said Betty. "We will all buy some dolls, and make dresses for them ourselves, at the Club meetings."

Ruth Warren glanced at the children quickly. Elsa was daintily dressed in a soft, black gown with a fine-embroidered white guimpe; Betty had on a pretty blue-and-green Scotch plaid dress, with a simple muslin guimpe: the Danforths and the Whites were well-to-do people. But what about the

Holts? The hem of Alice's sailor-suit had been twice let down, — the careful pressing of the creases could not conceal the fact; her stocking-knees were closely darned, her shoes were shabby; and her story of how all the family worked to help earn money was undoubtedly true. If Betty and Elsa bought dolls, Alice might not be able to buy so many as they. So Miss Ruth said at once: "I will provide the dolls, and you may dress them. Each of you bring some pieces of pretty ginghams and wash-goods to me before next Friday, and I will have the dresses cut out and ready for you to begin on when you come to the Club meeting. Do you think you can make dresses for as many as two dozen dolls in all, — twenty-four dolls that will be, and eight apiece for you?"

"O, yes, yes!" came the chorus of answers.

"Then, sometime when the Club is sewing and we are tired of talking, I will tell you a story about a little old lady's doll," said Miss Ruth.

"O, tell it now!" urged Betty.

"Please!" "Please!" begged Elsa and Alice.

"The next time, perhaps," said Miss Ruth, glancing up at the clock, whose hour-hand was fast approaching five, and shaking her head at Betty's added "Please!"

"Don't you think we ought to have a few boy dolls?" asked Alice. "Some of the convalescent children are boys, and Ben likes my boy dolls best."

"Does Ben play with dolls?" asked Betty scornfully, rattling the tongs by the fireside.

"He used to when he was littler," said Alice, "and he does sometimes now, when he has the sore throat and has to stay in the house. He doesn't mind other boys knowing it, either," she said, sitting up very straight in the deep chair, her blue eyes beaming with pride; "one of the boys teased him about it, and Ben ducked him into the frog-pond. Ben is different from other boys," Alice explained, turning to Miss Ruth. "I think he would like to come to the Club sometimes."

"We don't want boys in our Club," objected Betty, rising and walking around the room.

"But Ben isn't like other boys," said Elsa from her corner with the cats.

"Ben could often help us," said Miss Ruth encouragingly; "there will be ever so much that a boy can do, especially toward Christmas-time."

"Ben can sew, too," said loyal Alice. She loved her twin brother heartily and wanted to have him in all her good times.

"Here comes Ben, now," exclaimed Betty, catching sight of him from the window.

"He said he would call for me about five o'clock," cried Alice, running with Betty to the front door.

Back they came in a moment, followed by a rosy-cheeked boy, taller than Alice but looking very much like her except that his big blue eyes sparkled with fun, while hers were dreamy and rather serious. Ben had on a short reefer jacket and knee trousers. In his red-mittened hands he held the round cap which he had pulled off from his close-cropped yellow hair.

"This is my twin brother," said Alice, leading him forward to Miss Ruth.

"My name is Benjamin Franklin Holt," said the boy, hastily pulling off his right-hand red mitten. His cheeks grew rosier than ever, as he bowed and shook hands with Miss Ruth, but he kept his eyes on her face in a manly fashion.

Ruth Warren liked the little fellow from that moment for his straightforward look. "We are glad to see you, Ben," she said, "and we were just talking about your coming to the Club sometimes."

"Are you going to have a Club? I might come when there isn't anything else to do," said Ben cheerfully.

"Ben!" exclaimed his sister.

"All right, Peggy. Yes, ma'am, thank you, I'd like to come sometimes." Ben edged over to the sofa. The two gray cats jumped down when he began stroking them, and rubbed against his legs.

"Ben loves animals," said Alice, with shining eyes.

"Alice told us you like to play dolls," said Betty teasingly.

"I do, sometimes, when there isn't anything better to do," said Ben. He gave a funny side-glance at Miss Ruth out of his twinkling eyes as he added, straightening up his fine, sturdy little figure: "I ducked a boy in the frog-pond once for trying to tease me about dolls."

Ruth Warren's eyes laughed back into Ben's, but she said very seriously: "I am sure you would not treat any of your sister's friends in ungallant fashion."

"That's the trouble about girls," replied Ben confidentially; "a boy can't ever play fair with them, because they are girls." One of the things which always delighted people with Ben was his extremely friendly and wise manner.

"You have not asked the name of our Club, Ben," suggested Miss Ruth.

"Don't tell him, please, until he really joins," urged Betty.

"That will be time enough," said Ben, carelessly but sweet-temperedly.

"I must go this minute!" cried Elsa, jumping up from the sofa and hurriedly putting on her coat, as the clock struck five. "Good-bye! good-bye! I've had a beautiful time. Thank you, Miss Ruth!" she called back as she darted out of the house.

Betty White's musical voice — which seemed to belong with the shining brown hair and the fearless eyes — followed Miss Ruth and the Holt twins as they made their way down the front steps a few moments later: "We will run straight home from school to your house, Miss Ruth, for the Club meeting next Friday afternoon; and don't forget the story."

Alice and Ben walked the short distance homeward with Miss Ruth. Happy Alice chattered away about the Club: "I am so glad it is really started," she said gleefully, as they stopped at the foot of the Warrens' door-steps.

Ben whipped off his cap and stood bareheaded, looking up into Ruth Warren's face. Something friendly in her eyes made him say: "You look as if you liked boys, Black Lace Lady."

"I do like boys, Ben," said Miss Ruth; and from that moment she and Ben were friends.

Ben, while she spoke, had been pulling Alice by the hand. "Come on, Peggy," he cried now.

But Alice hung back long enough to call out: "Ben always has names for people. Good-bye!" Then the twins ran off together, hand in hand.

At half-past five Elsa Danforth sat at a side-table in the dining-room bay window eating her bread and milk supper out of a gold-lined silver porringer. The soft light from the great, glowing chandelier in the dining-room fell upon the beautiful flowering plants and upon the little black-gowned figure sitting there among them, all alone. Elsa had begged the maid to leave the shades up, — it grew dark early these short November days, — and she glanced out every now and then through the twilight at the Warren house with happy thoughts in her heart. She almost felt as if she had company, for the house was so near and Miss Ruth had been so kind that afternoon.

Mrs. Danforth, the tall, stately lady whom Elsa called "grandmother" — never "grandmamma" — dined at half-past six, for, notwithstanding the solitude of her life since her husband, Judge Danforth, had died and she had come to live in this

suburban town of Berkeley, she chose to keep up the formal New York way of living. She had late breakfasts always, so that when Elsa was attending school, the only times the two saw one another for more than a few moments were at luncheon, in the evening after Mrs. Danforth's dinner was over and before Elsa's bedtime, and on Sunday.

Elsa often felt very lonely, especially eating by herself. But she never complained; she never thought herself very large or important, and she was quite used to obeying her grandmother. Uncle Ned had said for her to do exactly as her grandmother wanted her to do; and if Uncle Ned had said this, it must be all right.

"Who are the children in your Club, Elsa, beside Elizabeth White?" asked Mrs. Danforth that evening. She and Elsa were sitting in the luxurious library. The chairs were upholstered in dark green velvet, the books on the tables and in the bookcases had rich bindings. Out of the library opened a long drawing-room furnished in cream colour and gold, and having beautiful inlaid cabinets full of treasures.

Mrs. Danforth was a handsome woman, very erect, with a broad white forehead, gray hair, heavy dark eyebrows, and keen blue eyes. She was dressed

in a corded black silk, richly trimmed with lace and jet.

Elsa looked up from her book and answered: "The other member of the Club is Alice, and maybe her brother Ben is coming sometimes, grandmother."

"What is their last name?" asked the grandmother quickly.

"Alice and Ben Bolt," said Elsa.

"Nonsense, child," replied Mrs. Danforth: she had a discouraging way of saying "Nonsense!" that made Elsa feel like a very small and silly child; "those are names from an old nursery ballad."

"I am sure their names are Alice and Ben, anyway, grandmother," said Elsa, pushing back the silky hair which had dropped forward, and looking steadily at her grandmother out of great, wide-open eyes.

"Probably those are not their real names," replied Mrs. Danforth. She seemed rather troubled about something, Elsa thought. And then the child tried to remember if she had done anything her grandmother did not like.

Later, just before Elsa's bedtime, Mrs. Danforth asked again: "What is the last name of the children you call Alice and Ben?"

"Bolt, or Holt, or Colt may be; I can't remember," answered Elsa, looking up from the pages of the "Swiss Family Robinson" and hoping her grandmother would not notice that the mantel clock was striking eight.

"Where do they live?"

"O, a mile away," said Elsa. "And they have hens and a garden, and they raise radishes for the city market."

"Are you sure they are proper children for you to associate with?"

"O, yes, grandmother," said Elsa warmly. "Alice, especially, has beautiful manners; Betty says her mother especially likes to have her play with Alice."

"I must speak to Mrs. White about it, to make sure," said Mrs. Danforth, and Elsa's face coloured sensitively, for she felt that her grandmother thought she was not telling the truth.

"Bedtime now, Elsa," said Mrs. Danforth, the next moment. "Put away your book. And try to remember people's names. It is something a lady always does."

"Yes, grandmother," said Elsa dutifully.

Almost any one, looking on, would have been surprised to see Elsa walk up to her grandmother

and, instead of kissing her good night, put out her hand; and then to see Mrs. Danforth touch the slender, childlike hand for only a brief second with the tips of her jewelled fingers. But Elsa understood; long ago her grandmother had explained that she thought kissing was an unnecessary and foolish custom.

"Good night, Elsa. Remember to say your prayers."

"Yes, grandmother. Good night."

Elsa went slowly out of the room and up the polished stairs to her own room, which always seemed empty to her, with its white-papered walls, white bed, white furniture, curtains, even white frames on the pictures of Greek statuary and ruined temples.

Mrs. Danforth never thought of tucking Elsa into bed; and the child, as she hung her black dress over the chair to-night, shed a few tears — as she often did — over having to go to bed all alone in that white, white room where her little black dresses looked so black.

It seemed to Elsa that she had been wearing black dresses all her life. Three years ago her mother had died, then a year later her grandfather, Judge Danforth, died, and within the last twelve months,

her father. Since her father's death, her own pretty home had been broken up, her old nurse dismissed, and she had lived with her grandmother, at first in the great New York house, and now for three months amid new surroundings in Berkeley.

No wonder that the grief and the many changes and now the sober, quiet life with her grandmother in a new place, had made Elsa a sad-eyed, white-faced child. The late summer, after their coming to Berkeley, had been particularly lonely, for there had been nobody to play with. Since October, however, when the Whites had come back from their summer home, Elsa had been happier. Betty as near neighbour, had become Elsa's special friend, and now she and Alice had also made friends.

When Elsa was ready for bed, in her long white nightgown, she turned off the electric light, put up the window-shades, and looked out toward the Warren house. "I wonder which is Miss Ruth's room," she whispered to herself. "Wish I dared to ask her, because if it's on this side, I could look over sometimes, and feel as if I had company."

With a little sigh, Elsa knelt down by her white bed and mumbled her prayer. Then, jumping up from her knees, she listened at the door. Not a sound from Cummings, her grandmother's maid,

who had the room next to Elsa's, and who usually stayed down in the servants' dining-room until nine o'clock. Everything was quiet. So Elsa went quickly over to the white bureau and pulling open the lower drawer, took from under a pile of playthings a rather small china doll in a faded pink dress, the red of whose cheeks had been almost entirely kissed off. With this doll hugged close in her arms, Elsa crept into bed.

On the white-cushioned couch between the windows sat a dignified row of dolls, seven in all, and all in good clothes. But better than any of these, Elsa loved her little old china doll which her own dear nurse had given her at parting and which Elsa had named for her nurse, Bettina. For some reason which Elsa did not try to explain to herself, she kept Bettina from the sight of her grandmother and especially from Cummings, the middle-aged woman who attended to Mrs. Danforth's wardrobe and in what time there was left, made dresses for Elsa. Every morning when Elsa woke, the first thing she did, after pressing many loving kisses upon Bettina's worn face, was to put her away under the pile of playthings in the lower drawer of the bureau.

Thinking about the Club made Elsa feel very

wide awake. She began picturing to herself Betty White's nursery-room with the bright scarlet geraniums, the strawberry-birds, and the pretty chintz cushions; and she hugged her doll the closer to take away the feeling of loneliness in her own dreary white room.

"Now, listen, Bettina, and try to learn our verses; and perhaps we can go to sleep," said Elsa, beginning to whisper softly the cradle-song her father had taught her, not long before he died. Repeating these three verses every night meant more to Elsa than the prayer which she hurried through on her knees. And Bettina listened attentively, as dolls listen, while a voice said close to her ears:

"Dear Heart, Sweet Heart,
Time that little children
Creep into their mothers' arms, to wait Sleep's silent call;
Sweet Heart, Dear Heart,
All the little children
Must the Moon find sleeping when she mounts Heaven's wall!

"Sweet Heart, Dear Heart,
Over little children,
As they dream their white, white dreams, the wings of Love are pressed;
Dear Heart, Sweet Heart,
They were little children
Whom the blessèd Child of Bethlehem lovèd best!

"Dear Heart, Sweet Heart,
All the little children
Come from Love, and go to Love, when life's long day is done;
Sweet Heart, Dear Heart,
All are little children,
Hushed at last, on Nature's bosom, one by one!"

And, as usually happened, when Elsa had said the last words, she fell fast asleep.

Down-stairs, Mrs. Danforth, putting aside her book, sat a long time deep in thought, her eyes shaded from the light. "Ben and Alice; Alice and Ben!" she kept repeating to herself. "Strange, — and the name, too, Holt, or Bolt; — yet it may be only that foolish old song. I must find out about it all."

Finally, being a woman of strong will, she put the matter out of her mind, leaned back into the luxurious chair and went on reading her novel; while up-stairs, Elsa, the child who bore no shadow of resemblance to her in looks or ways, fell asleep with wet eyelashes.

Mrs. Danforth had every intention of being kind to Elsa. She provided suitable and pretty frocks and the daintiest of underwear for the child; she paid careful attention to Elsa's education, her manners and her companions. The one thing she failed

to give the child was the unbounded love which little fatherless and motherless Elsa needed more than anything else in the world.

In many ways Mrs. Danforth was proud of Elsa, — proud of her straight, naturally graceful figure, her spirited bearing, her wonderfully beautiful hair and eyes. Mrs. Danforth was a proud woman, and she enjoyed the thought that the little girl whom she called grandchild was well worthy of the name. She had never really cared for any child except her own daughter; but that was a sad story of long ago.

There was a definite reason why Mrs. Danforth did not give more affection to Elsa, just as there was a definite purpose back of her coming to live in Berkeley. This purpose, however, Mrs. Danforth was slow in carrying out, being a proud-spirited woman. To her many New York friends she explained her removal to Berkeley upon the ground that the quiet, suburban town, with its cultured people and its good schools, was a better place than New York City for Elsa to live in during the years of her young girlhood.

CHAPTER II

PRINCE GRAY OWL

Forth he set in the breezy morn,
Across green fields of nodding corn,
As goodly a Prince as ever was born.
— *Christina Rossetti.*

Where every wind and leaf can talk,
But no man understand
Save one whose child-feet chanced to walk
Green paths of fairyland.
— *Sophie Jewett.*

"THE children are late," said Miss Ruth to Sarah who, soon after three o'clock the next Friday afternoon, came into the library with a large plate piled high with ginger cookies cut into shapes of animals, — horses, cats, dogs, giraffes, and elephants.

"Like as not they have given up wantin' to have a club," snapped Sarah, shutting her mouth as if she had bitten off the words. "Children nowadays are spoilt with havin' such a lot done for 'em." Sarah looked disappointed, however; she had spent a long time in making those cookies.

Sarah Judd was the only servant in the Warren household, and she had lived in the family a long time. Whenever Ruth Warren said anything to her about having a younger woman to help, Sarah always shook her head until the corkscrew side-curls fairly bobbed up and down and answered: "No, madam: if you have anybody else come to work for you, I go!" As old Sarah understood perfectly the ways and wishes of Miss Virginia Warren, Ruth's aunt, Ruth kept the cross-spoken servant, who was in reality a kind-hearted woman.

Ruth Warren had learned the wisdom of silence when Sarah made scolding remarks; so now she kept on cutting out dresses for the rows and rows of dolls, — big and little dolls, blond-haired and black-haired, waxen-headed and china-headed, blue-eyed, gray-eyed, black-eyed, — two of each kind and twenty-four in all, lying there on the centre-table.

Sarah lingered in the room, brushing a little dust from the table with the corner of her white apron. "What a handsome lot of doll-babies," she said after a moment; "I hope the children will come. I thought at first that havin' 'em come would make an awful sight of dust an' crumbs; but I can sweep Saturday mornin's instead of Fridays, an' it's kinder

nice to hear children 'round, a-talkin' an' a-laughin', as fast as a sewin'-machine. Bless my heart, here they come now, a-hurryin' along!" Sarah dodged behind the curtain and looked out over the tops of her spectacles. "Ain't they cunnin' little things!" she exclaimed, "comin' along with their arms twined 'round one another, an' that lively Betty White in the middle!"

As Sarah turned from behind the window-curtain to answer the quick ring of the front-door bell, she said anxiously: "If they eat all the animals in the plate, I have got some more plain cookies they can have."

A moment later Sarah led the three girls into the library, her side-curls bobbing with excitement.

"O, look at those cookies!" cried Betty, after she had greeted Miss Ruth. "Good old Sarah must have made them." And Sarah vanished from the doorway with a smile which made her thin, dry face seem suddenly to have cracked.

"I'm dreadfully sorry we are late, Miss Ruth," Betty cried out, excitedly — Betty was almost always the first to begin talking. "It is all my fault — I had to stay after school, and Elsa and Alice waited for me." Betty stopped for breath, fanning

herself with the skirt of her blue and green plaid gown.

"We wanted to wait," said Alice with a shy, half-look at Miss Ruth, then turning quickly to examine the piles of dolls again, with Elsa.

"I got zero in arithmetic," Betty rattled on again, "and I didn't read well, and I got caught whispering, so I had to eat three little bitter blossoms and stay fifteen minutes after school. I wish there wasn't any school," she added, with a toss of her brown hair.

"So do I," agreed Elsa, promptly, but Alice looked a little shocked.

"Help yourselves to the cookies, girls; Sarah made them especially for you," said Miss Ruth, seeing Betty's and Elsa's eyes fixed upon the gingerbread animals.

"I shouldn't care if I didn't know anything, if I could have people read to me and tell me stories," said Betty, biting off the trunk of an elephant cookie.

"O, Miss Ruth, you said you would tell us a story!" exclaimed Elsa, eagerly.

"Yes, — a story about a doll and an old lady," cried Betty, forgetting her school troubles.

"Wasn't it strange for an old lady to have a doll?" said Alice, her blue eyes very serious.

"Strange perhaps, but true," replied Miss Ruth, who had taken the tongs and was stirring the fire into a splendid blaze. "Which would you rather have, — that story, or one about a 'Prince Gray Owl?'"

"Both," answered Betty, "but the gray owl story first."

"The doll story first, please," begged Elsa. The fire lighted up the golden-brown of Miss Ruth's gown, and its brown fur trimming; Elsa decided that the fur just matched the colour of Miss Ruth's eyes.

"I should like either story first, — only both please," said Alice slowly, between bites at a long-necked giraffe.

"Which one can you tell easiest, Miss Ruth?" Elsa suddenly remembered to ask.

"I could tell the fairy story more easily to-day, perhaps, because I told it only yesterday to my little niece who was visiting me. The old lady's doll story actually happened, so that I remember it better."

"Then the fairy story first, please," Elsa said,

contentedly. She had one of the little dolls in her arms.

"Didn't the fairy story really happen, too?" Alice asked quickly. She had chosen from among the dolls a blue-eyed, yellow-haired one that looked very much like herself.

"What a silly question, Baby Alice," cried Betty. "Of course fairy stories aren't true."

"What makes you like fairy stories, Betty, if they are not true?" Elsa asked, seeing that Alice looked hurt.

"Because fairies are so dear and kind that it makes you wish they were true," Betty replied.

"Fairy stories were true in the once-upon-a-time days," said Miss Ruth, to end the discussion; "that is, people believed in fairies," she added.

"Are these the dresses for us to make, all pinned on to the dolls, Miss Ruth?" Elsa asked. "We've talked so much about other things that we haven't said hardly anything about the dolls."

"It's nice to have their underclothes all made," said Betty, "because it saves so much of our time." Betty had finally taken one of the largest dolls to dress.

"Do you each want to dress first the one you have chosen?" asked Miss Ruth.

"Yes!" "Yes!" was the quick chorus.

"Then you may begin now, and I will sew, too," said Miss Ruth, seating herself by the table. "Here is a thimble for each of you, and in this big work-basket you will find needles and sewing cotton and scissors. Help yourselves to the cookies: and you need not be extra careful about crumbs, because Sarah is going to sweep the library to-morrow morning."

The three girls grouped themselves near the table and threaded their needles.

"Please begin," Betty whispered, just as Miss Ruth was asking of Alice: "Is Ben coming to the Club?"

"He wanted to, he told me," said Alice, "but the other boys teased him to go skating, 'cause Morse's Pond is frozen over."

Betty tossed her head: "I knew he didn't want to belong."

"He told me he did," said Elsa, who, being sensitive herself, usually knew when Alice's feelings were hurt. Elsa's eyes were shining with pleasure: it was only half past three o'clock, there was an hour and a half of enjoyment ahead, with dolls' dresses all ready to make, ginger cookies to eat, and a fairy story to hear. The bright wood-fire spark-

ling and crackling added to the cheer. Her eyes were dark like purple pansies as she raised them, expectantly, to Miss Ruth.

"Now that we are all ready," said Miss Ruth, "I will begin. *Prince Gray Owl* is the name of the story."

"Was the Gray Owl really a prince?" asked Alice.

"Hush!" said Betty.

Once upon a time, — began Miss Ruth, — there was a beautiful princess who lived in a great gray castle with her uncle. The castle and the kingdom belonged to the princess, but as the king, her father, and the queen, her mother, were dead, her uncle ruled over the kingdom.

Princess Katrina was only ten years old when her father and mother died. As the years went on, her uncle liked better and better to be king, and did not want to give up the position. But he knew that when Princess Katrina married, he could no longer be king, because her husband would become the ruler. Many a brave young prince wanted to marry the princess, whose great beauty and cheerful heart were famed throughout the world. But the uncle said "No" to each one of these suitors, and or-

dered them never to come into the kingdom again on penalty of having their heads cut off.

Princess Katrina was now nineteen years old. Her uncle knew that if she were not married before she was twenty-one, she could then choose a husband for herself. So he arranged to have her marry, not a prince, but a wicked old king, ruler of a far-off country, two days' journey beyond the sunset. The uncle agreed to give this bad man a large sum of gold with the princess, and in return, the uncle was to keep the kingdom. For the far-away king wanted gold more than he did land.

Early one September morning Katrina's uncle came to the sunshiny bower where she sat alone, embroidering a beautiful scarlet and gold tapestry. The princess made a beautiful picture, there in the sunshine, with her soft hair shining like spun gold, her clear blue eyes, and her fair cheeks tinged with rose colour. She looked a royal princess indeed, in her blue velvet gown, with a long scarf of light blue gauze floating over her shoulders.

"Good morning, Uncle Wulfred," said the princess. She was not very fond of her uncle, but she always greeted him kindly.

The wicked uncle had a crafty and cruel face. The jewelled gold crown came almost down to the

ears of his small, round head, and the kingly, ermine-trimmed green velvet robe hung loosely from his short, stooping figure.

"Princess niece," said the uncle, without any "Good morning" greeting, "you are now over nineteen years old and it is time you were married, so I have chosen a husband for you. King Rupert from the land two days' journey beyond the sunset is coming at the end of a month to marry you."

Princess Katrina's happy, beautiful face turned very pale. "Do you mean that cross, unkind old king who visited you a six-month ago and who one day at banquet broke the neck of a poor, faithful hound who offended him? Nay, Uncle Wulfred, I will not marry such a man."

"I say you shall marry him," stormed the uncle, walking up and down the room with jingling spurs.

"Never! I will die first!" cried the princess. Rising suddenly in front of her uncle, she faced him with white cheeks and flashing eyes. The scarlet and gold tapestry fell from her hands to the floor.

"You shall marry King Rupert, or die!" the uncle shouted; his small eyes snapped angrily, his face grew purple, and he brought his steel-gloved hand down upon the table so heavily that the em-

broidery bodkins and scissors rolled off, clattering, to the floor. "This-very-morning," he said so fast that the words almost tumbled over each other, "I-will-shut-you-up-in-the-East-Tower. At-the-end-of-a-week-I-will-come-to-ask-if-you-will-marry-King-Rupert. If-you-refuse-to-mind-me, I-will-put-you-where-you-will-have-a-harder-time, the-second-week."

When her uncle stopped, purple in the face, to take breath, Princess Katrina answered him scornfully and without fear: "You are a wicked uncle. It is because you want to keep my kingdom that you are trying to make me marry that cruel old king, who lives far away."

At these words, the uncle grew more angry than ever, because they were the truth. He stamped heavily with his right foot three times upon the stone floor.

Instantly three tall men in black robes, with black masks over their faces, rushed into Katrina's bower. One of the men pushed back from the door-way Katrina's old nurse who lived with the princess now as serving-woman. Quickly throwing a part of his black robe over the head of the gray-haired woman, the man led her away.

"Make the princess a prisoner!" commanded the

uncle, pointing with his sword at Katrina, who did not move or even cry out.

The two men in black seized Katrina roughly by the shoulders.

"Take this disobedient girl to the East Tower!" roared the angry uncle.

Katrina did not speak, but her blue eyes gleamed proudly as the guards led her away.

The East Tower was an old, unused part of the castle, a long distance from the part where the royal household lived. To reach the tower, the guards led Katrina through many rooms hung with spiders' webs, over broken stone floors, and along dark passage-ways where rats scuttled.

"I am glad I wasn't Katrina to have to go where there were rats!" exclaimed Alice.

"Don't interrupt, Peggy!" cried Betty.

Miss Ruth smiled, and continued:

The old East Tower of the castle was almost forgotten. No one ever went there. Tall trees and bushes grew up around it, and a deep moat surrounded it.

"What is a moat?" asked Betty.

"A deep hollow, like a trench or a wide ditch,

filled with water," explained Miss Ruth, and Alice whispered — but very sweet-temperedly — to Betty: "Who's interrupting now?" as Miss Ruth began again:

The land beyond the East Tower, across the moat, belonged to a neighbouring king, who had been away at war for many years. No lonelier place than the tower could have been found for a prison.

"A safe place for the girl," said the false king to his wicked counsellors when they came back and told him they had locked Princess Katrina into the upper room of the tower.

"But suppose she dies there?" said one of the counsellors, who had a daughter at home, of about Katrina's age.

"If she dies, no one will be the wiser, and you will be rich men," said the king. "Be sure you keep the old nurse drugged, and a guard to watch her."

After that, when the royal ladies of the court asked King Wulfred where the princess was, he told them she had been suddenly called away by the illness of her aunt in another kingdom, and that the old nurse had gone with the princess.

Katrina was very lonely and sad the first few days in the round upper room of the old stone tower.

Three times each day the strong door was unlocked and food and candles were set into the room. The man who brought the food and the three candles would not say a word in answer to Katrina's questions. In the daytime, the princess walked around the room, looking from one after another of the three windows at the trees outside. When night came, she put all three of her candles at the window where the leaves of the trees seemed thinnest, hoping that some one passing might see the light, and wonder at its being there in the old, deserted tower, and so come to her rescue.

On the third day, the princess saw the bright eyes of a gray squirrel looking in at the window; she put some food upon the window-sill, and presently the squirrel came in through the iron bars, ate the food, then sat up on his haunches and looked at her quite fearlessly.

"I would help you if I could," said the gray squirrel, unexpectedly, "but all I can do is to give you my company."

Katrina was greatly surprised to hear the squirrel speak, but she answered quickly: "If you will talk with me sometimes that will help me, for I am so lonely."

"I will come every day," he replied. "Now I

must go home to arrange my engagements." Straightening out his splendid bushy tail, he jumped from the window-sill into the thick leaves of an oak-tree, out of sight, like a flash.

After that, the gray squirrel came every day at exactly the same time. He sat on Katrina's shoulder and chattered about his busy life in the great forest; and in turn Katrina told him about her being shut up in the tower by her cruel uncle.

"I would help you if I could," said the squirrel one day, growing so angry over her imprisonment that he tried to bite the iron bars of the window, and in doing so, broke off two of his best front teeth. From that time, Princess Katrina gave him more of her food, because he could not crack nuts so well now. "Elf will mend my teeth some day, elf will mend them," said the squirrel cheerfully.

On the afternoon of the seventh day, the cruel uncle unlocked the door of the tower-room and stood before the princess. He was covered with dust and cobwebs from coming through the unused rooms and dark passages which led to the tower.

"Is my dear niece ready to obey me and marry King Rupert?" the uncle asked in a make-believe anxious voice.

Princess Katrina held up her head courageously.

"Never!" she said: "I will never consent to marry that dreadful old man." Her golden hair gleamed like sunshine against the dark gray stone walls.

She was so brave and fair standing there in her royal blue velvet gown, facing him, that her uncle was half afraid. "It is for your good," he said in a shaking voice, the keys jingling in his hand.

Katrina answered him quickly: "It is for your gain."

Then the uncle cried out fast, with blazing eyes: "This-next-week-you-shall-live-in-the-lower-room-and-have-food-only-twice-a-day-and-only-two-candles-for-the-night. At-the-end-of-a-week-I-will-visit-you-and-if-you-refuse-to-marry-King-Rupert-I-will-put-you-where-you-have-a-harder-time." Seizing her wrist, he dragged her roughly behind him through the door and down the narrow, winding stone steps to the room below, thrust her into it, and locked the creaking, heavy door upon her.

That night Princess Katrina was dreadfully afraid. A wild storm of wind and rain shook the tower and made her candle-light flicker. Once when something gray brushed against the window she shrieked aloud; but, watching, she saw that the gray object stopped on a branch of the great oak-tree outside the window, and that it was a large,

soft owl, as tall as a man. The owl sat there a long time, staring at the candle-light with blinking yellow eyes that had tiny black spots at their centre, and the princess was comforted by the sense of companionship.

The next morning when the food and candles were brought, a package was put with them, inside the door.

Katrina hurriedly unwrapped the package and was overjoyed to find in it her scarlet and gold tapestry, her bodkins, her skeins of scarlet and gold embroidery silk, and a little paper cleverly sewed on the very place where she had stopped her work the morning when her uncle came into her bower. On the paper was written, in her old nurse's handwriting: "The counsellors kept me drugged for a week, then they told me you had gone away. I did not believe them, and I bribed the guard, with all the gold I had, to tell me where you are and to takes these things to you. Keep a good heart. I go away from the castle to help you."

When the gray squirrel came, early that afternoon, Katrina told him what had happened and asked him what he thought.

The gray squirrel sat up very still and looked at the princess out of his round black eyes: "The

gray owl will rescue you," said the squirrel at last, solemnly.

"Who told you so?" asked the princess.

"I heard the bluejays talking about it this morning," he said, winking his eyes rapidly.

"Who told the bluejays?" Katrina inquired.

"They are great gossips: they hear things by listening at the front doors of the other birds' homes." The squirrel looked so fierce all at once that the princess asked quickly: "Do you know the gray owl?" and before the squirrel could answer, began telling him about the gray owl she had seen outside her window the night before. "Do you know him?" she asked again.

"I know some gray owls, — I am sorry to say," replied the squirrel, shaking his tail.

The princess opened her blue eyes very wide as she asked, "Why are you sorry?"

"Squirrels and owls cannot be friendly," said the gray squirrel rather sadly.

"Why?" asked the princess.

"Because it has always been so," he answered, whisking his tail excitedly and jumping out of the window so that the princess could not ask him any more questions.

That afternoon as Katrina began embroidering

once more upon her scarlet and gold tapestry, her thoughts were even busier than her fingers. What did her nurse mean by writing that puzzling sentence: "I go away from the castle to help you?" Over and over again, Katrina turned these words in her mind. But she felt comforted and hopeful.

When darkness fell, the princess put her two candles at the window, and said to herself: "Perhaps the gray owl will come again to the oak-tree." For a long time she waited with her tender face pressed against the iron bars. By and by she heard a soft whirr-r of wings, and the gray owl settled upon a branch below the window.

Katrina looked eagerly into the round, blinking eyes: "I wish you could speak," she said, half-aloud.

The gray owl stepped so near the light that the little black line almost faded out of his yellow eyes. Katrina was surprised at the owl's great size, and even more surprised to hear a muffled voice say: "Keep a good heart. I will save you." Then the owl spread its soft wings and flew noiselessly away.

It was soon after that the princess heard a faint, regular sound, as of iron striking against stone; and the sound lasted all night, — as long as she stayed awake, which was a long time, for she kept

asking herself over and over again: "Will the gray owl really save me from this dungeon?" The squirrel had said the owl would do this, and now the owl himself said so.

In the days of Princess Katrina, the world of mankind had not moved very far away from fairy-land. The princess was not half so much astonished to hear a squirrel and an owl speak as a princess would be to-day. Katrina's old nurse had told her many a tale of wonder; the nurse had that very day sent the message, "Keep a good heart;" and the gray owl had repeated the same words, "Keep a good heart." By and by Katrina fell asleep, still puzzled, but happy in having such good friends as the nurse, the squirrel and the owl.

The next morning, when the squirrel came as usual, Katrina asked his opinion about the owl and the strange noise; but all the squirrel would say was: "Owls are very strong. Owls have sharp, strong beaks." Then he whisked away, as if in haste. So Katrina stopped talking to the squirrel about the owl after that, for the subject seemed to offend him.

Every night, regularly, when darkness fell, Katrina heard the faint pick! pick! of iron upon stone, and every night, as she leaned against the window-

bars, after the pick! pick! began, she heard the muffled words, "Keep a good heart!" She did not always see the owl, but on those nights she thought the owl must have perched upon a branch much lower than her window, for, straining her eyes, she could see a gray shape below.

When the end of the second week came, Katrina wound the scarlet and gold tapestry around her slender body, under her blue velvet gown, so that her uncle should not see it. All day long she waited for him, but he did not come until dusk. The key turned slowly in the rusty lock. Her uncle stood before her.

"Girl! Katrina!" he shouted, for he was frightened by her white face. "Have you come to your senses? Are you ready to marry King Rupert?"

"Never! I will never marry King Rupert," Katrina answered, looking at her uncle with flashing blue eyes so like those of his dead brother, her father, that the uncle swore a terrible oath to keep up his courage, and said very fast, though his teeth chattered: "Down — to — the — dungeon — with — you! Food — only — once — a — day. One — small — candle — for — the — night. Be — ready — to — marry — King — Rupert — at — the —

end — of — a — week — or — you — will — have — a — harder — time."

With trembling hands the coward uncle put a key into a keyhole in the floor, raised a trap-door by an iron ring, and pushed Katrina down the dark stairs. She lifted her white face bravely and said: "Never will I do your bidding;" then the trap-door closed over her head.

Down into the darkness the beautiful princess felt her way. After a few moments she could see, by the dim light that came in from the one window, a rough wooden bench, a stool, and a pile of dry leaves in one corner. Outside the window, the oak leaves were very thick. Katrina reached through the iron bars and broke the leaves from the nearest branches. The strong stems hurt her hands, but she gained a little more light and air.

Before the dim twilight faded away, brave Katrina stirred the dry leaves on the stone floor and found to her great comfort that there were no creeping things underneath. After putting her scarlet and gold tapestry over the leaves to make a bed for herself, she lighted her one candle, and placing it upon the wooden bench before the window, sat down beside it. Darkness had hardly fallen before

she heard the pick! pick! as of iron upon stone, and lo! the sounds seemed close at her side.

Suppose the sounds were some plan of her uncle's to frighten her? For a moment Katrina's courage sank at the thought. But just then she heard a muffled voice ask: "Are you there, Princess?"

"Yes," she answered faintly. "Who are you?" The dungeon walls were thicker than the walls above; Katrina could only press so near the window as to see a gray figure outside.

"Your friend, the Gray Owl," said the low voice. "We must not talk much, for fear some one hear us. But keep a good heart."

Each day of that third week the princess worked a little while with the shining gold silk upon the tapestry; it was so dark in the dungeon that she could not see, even at noonday, to use the scarlet silk. She felt very faint, because she had only one meal a day, of bread and water, and she gave some of the bread to her daily visitor, the squirrel, who grew very thin without his usual nuts. She begged him every day to go to the elf and have his teeth mended, but he always answered: "It is a long way, and I will not go until you are saved."

On the fifth night of that week when the pick! pick! as of iron upon stone began, the princess

went to the window and whispered sadly: "I cannot keep heart much longer," and the low, muffled voice of the gray owl answered: "Courage! keep a good heart for one day more."

Upon the sixth day there was a dark tempest. Even at high noon the dungeon was dark. The gray squirrel looked wet and discouraged when he sprang in through the window at the usual time.

"Do you think the gray owl is going to save me?" asked the princess in her despair.

At the mention of the gray owl, the squirrel jumped for the window, but it was so dark in the dungeon that he bumped into the wall and fell upon the stone floor.

He held up a hurt front paw as Katrina ran to him. "Will you bind it with silk for me?" he asked. "Elf will mend it when I go to him, elf will mend it. But I shall have to stay with you now, because I cannot jump — nor even walk," he said, trying to rise but falling over again.

Katrina bound the wounded paw tenderly. All that afternoon the squirrel seemed to be thinking deeply, and Katrina could not make him talk.

Utter darkness fell early. The dungeon grew very cold, so that both Katrina and the squirrel shivered. She wrapped herself in the scarlet and

gold tapestry, took the squirrel in her hands, and crouched near the window.

Soon came a stir in the leaves outside. "Are you there, Princess?" asked the muffled voice. Katrina felt the squirrel begin to tremble violently.

"Yes, Gray Owl," she answered, waiting for him to say, "Keep a good heart." But instead, he said: "Prepare to leave the dungeon, Princess. Stand away from the window, for soon a large stone of the wall will fall into the dungeon."

Katrina moved to the opposite side, having hard work to keep the squirrel in her hands; he acted so frightened that she knew now it had been fear, not anger, which made him run away every time the owl's name was mentioned.

"Are you safe, Princess?" came the gray owl's question.

"Yes," she cried. Then she saw a heavy stone of the wall move inward more and more until it slid to the ground with a dull sound, and left a large open space in the wall.

"Here's the boy of the Club," announced Sarah, appearing at the door, followed by Ben.

Ruth Warren went forward to greet the red-cheeked boy, whose hair lay wet upon his forehead.

"'YES, GRAY OWL,' SHE ANSWERED."

"I thought I'd come for a little while," said Ben, his eyes upon the last cookie in the plate, a long-necked horse. "Skating wasn't much good, and I got in twice." His wet shoes proved this.

"Sit here by the hearth and dry your feet, Ben," said Miss Ruth, turning to brighten the fire.

"Let me do that," said Ben gallantly, reaching for the tongs.

Sarah took the plate from the table and vanished. Alice began explaining things to Ben:

"Miss Ruth is telling us a story about Prince Gray Owl, and he is just saving Princess Katrina from the dungeon. I can tell you the first of it on the way home, Ben." Alice had jumped up from her chair and was devotedly watching her brother while he blew to start the fire until his red cheeks stood out like small balloons.

"Please go on with the story, Miss Ruth," cried Betty, impatient at the delay.

But just then Sarah came in with the large plate piled high again with cookies. Ben put the tongs back in their place and seated himself contentedly near the cookies.

Miss Ruth spent a moment or two in looking over the girls' sewing. Betty had already made one doll's dress and begun another. Elsa and Alice

were just finishing their first ones. When Miss Ruth seated herself again, Elsa drew her chair nearer, and every now and then, as Miss Ruth went on with the story, Elsa reached out and stroked the soft fur on the golden brown gown.

"Princess, can you come through this opening in the wall?" asked a voice outside of the window-bars.

Trembling now with excitement, the princess took up the tapestry which had fallen around her and made it into a long roll, slender like herself.

"Try if this will go through, Gray Owl," she said. The squirrel clung to her shoulder.

Slowly the roll of tapestry disappeared through the opening.

"Do you dare follow, Princess?" came the thrilling question.

"I dare — and I follow," she answered.

"Save me!" cried the squirrel.

Katrina hid the shivering little creature in the folds of her blue gossamer scarf, and with a last look around the dread dungeon, extended her arms and put her head and shoulders through the opening in the wall. Even before the rain-drops outside fell upon her hands, she felt both hands grasped

strongly, and she was drawn gently and steadily forward until she could spring to her feet upright upon the soft ground.

Before her stood — not the gray owl she had expected to see, but a tall young man with a graceful figure, and richly dressed in a princely robe of dark green velvet.

The young man bowed low before Katrina. "Princess," he said, "I am the oldest son of the king, your neighbour. I was slightly wounded in one of my father's battles, and I came home the very day that your old nurse escaped to my father's castle and told of your imprisonment in this dungeon. I took the shape of an owl and flew across the moat, and as it was my right arm which was wounded, I kept the owl's shape and worked with the strong beak to remove this stone and free you."

"Sir, never did a knight do more for a maiden," said the princess, in turn bowing low. She saw that his right arm hung in a sling.

"I will now fly with you to my father's castle, where my mother, the queen, and your faithful nurse await you," said the prince.

Seeing the wonder on the sweet face of the princess, the prince said: "Once, when I was a boy, I saved a young gray owl from a fierce eagle; and

the gray owl's father was so grateful that he gave me the power to change into a gray owl, at will."

Then the prince said something which sounded like —

"Gray owl, gray owl,
I would be
A strong gray owl,
Like to thee."

And he turned into a great, soft-feathered gray owl. It could not have been just those words, — because Katrina tried to use them so that she might turn into an owl herself, long afterward, just for fun.

The prince, now the gray owl, spread out one of his soft wings and took the princess under it; then he gathered the roll of tapestry under the other wing, and flew away, over the moat, toward his father's castle.

"What about the gray squirrel?" asked Ben, excitedly flourishing a half-eaten camel.

On the flight to the home of the prince — said Miss Ruth — Katrina told the prince about the gray squirrel, whose little heart she could feel all the time beating against hers. "I have him with me, under my scarf," she said. "He is afraid of you,

I think," she added, so low that the squirrel could not hear.

"The gray owls will do anything for me," said the prince in a loud voice. "I will tell the greatest gray owl, the king of the forest, that from this time forth the owls and the squirrels must live peaceably together."

Hearing this, the squirrel took courage and put his head out from the folds of Katrina's blue scarf. "Thank you, Gray Owl," he said gratefully. Then he slipped away, for they were near the home of the elf, and he was anxious to have his front teeth and his broken paw mended.

It happened that the neighbouring king, who had been for many years away at war, grew alarmed when his son, Prince Edward, was wounded; and so the king came hurrying home the very night of the day that Princess Katrina was rescued from the dungeon. When this good king heard the story of her imprisonment, he decided to set forth the next morning to punish her wicked uncle, Wulfred, whom he had never liked, but with whom he had lived in peace, up to this time.

That day, at noon, the false king made his way to the East Tower and lifted up the trap-door of the dungeon. "Katrina! are you ready to marry

King Rupert?" he shouted down into the darkness.

No voice answered. The uncle called again in a louder voice. Still no answer came. He peered down into the blackness by the light of a long torch he had brought, but he could see nothing except the bed of leaves, the rude bench and the chair.

"She lies dead under the leaves," the uncle whispered to himself with chattering teeth. A bat flew against his face. Shaking with fear, he let the trap-door fall and hurried away, back through the winding, cobwebby passages, to the state rooms of the palace.

But there more fears awaited him. His three wicked counsellors rushed up and drew him to the front window, crying: "See!" "A foe is marching upon us!" "A great and mighty army!"

The false king saw in the distance an army of hundreds of men, all in glistening armour, with waving plumes and gleaming shields, line after line stretching far into the distance. At the head of the army, upon a magnificent black war-horse, rode the neighbouring king, clad in a suit of mail, with a glittering helmet on his head, surmounted by a flowing white plume. Behind the king, each upon a beautiful white horse, rode Prince Edward and

Princess Katrina; and upon the shoulder of the princess perched a large gray squirrel.

"Then what happened?" questioned Betty, breathlessly.

Miss Ruth, glancing at the clock, saw that the hands pointed closely to five, so she told the rest of the story very fast:

The wicked uncle was a coward before danger. When he found that the princess was with this great army, he made no resistance, but at once ordered the white flag of surrender to be flung out from the tower, for he knew that the powerful neighbouring king would not fail to avenge Katrina's wrongs.

The conquering king made the wicked uncle a prisoner, and had him put into the same dungeon where Katrina had been imprisoned. Prince Edward and Princess Katrina were married soon after, and ruled happily for many, many years. Behind their thrones hung the splendid scarlet-and-gold tapestry upon which the princess had worked during those dreary days in the dungeon. When the wicked uncle was an old man, grown thin and white-haired, Katriina had him set free from prison,

and he spent his last days at the court, playing with a feeble, old gray squirrel.

"Is that all?" sighed Betty, when Miss Ruth stopped talking.

"Thank you ever so much," said Elsa, as she sat looking into the fire: "I like Prince Gray Owl," she added soberly.

"I think Katrina was the best, though, because she had the poor old uncle pardoned," said tender-hearted Alice.

"What about the owls and the squirrels?" asked Ben, who was still eating ginger cookies.

"O, the owls and the squirrels lived happily together ever after in the woods around, even 'as far as the lands of the wicked King Rupert, two days' journey beyond the sunset,'" said Miss Ruth.

"I wish there was some more about them!" exclaimed Betty.

"There is more about the owls and the squirrels all the time, in the woods," said Miss Ruth. "How would you like some Friday afternoon, instead of having our meeting in the house, to walk out to the Convalescent Home and then come back through the woods?"

Each and every member of the Club agreed that

this would be a splendid way to have a club-meeting. "We could take home the sewing that we would do at the meeting," suggested Betty, "and bring it all finished to the next meeting, so as not to lose time dressing the dolls."

"You have done well this afternoon, girls," said Miss Ruth, beginning to gather up the dolls and their dresses; "and Betty's idea is a good one. Each of you ask at home if she may go on the walk, and perhaps we can have it next Friday."

"Then we can all see the Convalescings," said Ben eagerly. "They are nice little children, and I like to see them getting well."

"Five o'clock and five minutes after!" cried Elsa, springing up. "I must go, or grandmother will not like it."

"Do you have to mind — even five minutes?" asked Betty, in surprise.

"Yes," answered Elsa, hurriedly putting on her long black cloak. "Uncle Ned tells me to do just what grandmother says."

"Who is your Uncle Ned?" inquired Betty, who was taking a few last stitches in the doll's dress.

"Uncle Ned? He is the nicest and the dearest and the best man in all the world," said Elsa, her violet-gray eyes growing eloquent with feeling.

"He is nicer even than Prince Gray Owl, and I miss him all the time. Good-bye." And Elsa ran away with her wide black felt hat hanging from her arm, and with something very much like tears shining in her eyes.

Betty had sewed rapidly, and now she held up a second doll's dress, finished.

"Good, Betty!" said Miss Ruth. "Let me count how many we have done, — your two, Elsa and Alice each one, and two of mine, six in all, out of the twenty-four; it will take us just three meetings more to finish the eighteen dresses that are left."

"Then we can do some paper dolls, and rag dolls," said Alice, clapping her hands softly.

"Maybe I could help about the paper dolls;" Ben made the suggestion with a rather careless air. "I could paint dresses, because I know what looks pretty. When I grow up to be a man I am going to earn a lot of money and buy pretty dresses for Alice, and I'm going to get her a black lace one and a yellowy brown one trimmed with fur," he said, slowly.

Miss Ruth nodded encouragingly as she met Ben's earnest blue eyes.

"I will give you some of the pretty dresses,

Betty," said Alice unselfishly, feeling perfectly sure that Ben would do whatever he promised.

Betty almost said, "I have prettier dresses now than you have," but she stopped just in time and said instead: "I will give you a blue velvet dress, like Princess Katrina's."

To-day, Alice's blue sailor-suit looked more worn and even shorter than before, and Ben's sturdy little figure seemed almost bursting out through his tight jacket. But both Alice and Ben were too happy-natured to care much about clothes. He helped her on with her shabby blue coat most affectionately. The twins were very fond of one another, although Ben, being a boy, did not think so much about this as Alice did, for she openly and eagerly showed her love for him.

It was after quarter past five o'clock when Elsa Danforth, waiting in the bay-window of the dining-room for her bread-and-milk supper, saw Betty and Alice and Ben come out of the Warren house. "They have had all this much longer good time!" Elsa said to herself. Life seemed especially lonely to her just then. Her grandmother had reproved her for being late, as well as for running home without her hat on.

Elsa was just a simple and loving little girl, who tried very hard not to be an unhappy one, although she knew she was living without many things which other little girls had in their homes and with their mothers. She was lonelier than ever that night, when bed-time came: and this is how it happened.

Mrs. Danforth had hired a pew at the largest church in Berkeley, and had given money generously whenever asked to help any good cause. It had come time for the ladies of the church to make their yearly gift of clothing and toys to the Convalescent Home. And Mrs. Everett, the head of the committee, called upon Mrs. Danforth for some money, that afternoon.

"It seems too bad to spend money for playthings when so much is needed for clothing," said Mrs. Everett, as she folded the crisp ten-dollar bill which Mrs. Danforth handed her. "Has your grandchild any old toys which might do for the children?"

"I am sure she has," replied Mrs. Danforth, remembering a large boxful of half-worn toys in the garret, — toys which Elsa had said she was tired of.

"I could take them in my carriage now," said Mrs. Everett. She was a large-hearted woman,

much interested in the Convalescent Home and eager to help it.

Mrs. Danforth rang for her maid. "Cummings," she said to the very prim and proper looking woman in starched white cap and black dress who appeared instantly, "bring down that boxful of Miss Elsa's old toys from the garret. I am going to give them to a children's home."

As Cummings went noiselessly out of the room, Mrs. Danforth asked of her caller: "Do you happen to know a poor family by the name of Colt or Holt who live just outside the town?" The proud-faced woman bent forward to disentangle the gold chain of her eye-glasses from the jet ornaments of her waist.

"Yes, I know the Holts," said Mrs. Everett. "They are poor but very self-respecting people."

"They have a market-garden, I believe?" said Mrs. Danforth, still struggling with the chain.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Everett, "and they raise excellent lettuce and radishes; I can safely recommend their garden products to you. May I help you with that chain, Mrs. Danforth?"

"Thank you, I have it free now," said Mrs. Danforth, leaning back and changing the subject.

When Cummings came noiselessly in again, with a large pasteboard box, almost full of tin soldiers, picture-books and such playthings, she suggested very respectfully. "Miss Elsa has the lower drawer of her bureau full of toys, ma'am."

"Are you sure Miss Elsa does not play with them, Cummings?"

The gray-haired woman shook her head primly: "Oh, no, ma'am; she never touches them," — which was the truth, so far as Cummings knew.

"Very well; bring them also," said Mrs. Danforth.

As a result, some battered dolls' furniture, two or three boxes of games, and one small china doll were added to the collection in the pasteboard box. Cummings took the now-filled box out to Mrs. Everett's carriage, and the kind-hearted woman drove away, happy in having secured both money and playthings for the Convalescent Home.

When Elsa was ready for bed that night, she opened the lower drawer of the white bureau to take out Bettina. Her hand fell upon heaped-up ruffled and embroidered garments.

She turned on the electric light. There, in place of the odd assortment of playthings under which

she had kept Bettina hidden, was a pile of white underclothing.

Something seemed almost to stop Elsa's heart from beating as she opened one bureau drawer after another, and even hunted under the bureau, without finding her beloved doll. Suddenly she remembered hearing her grandmother say, that evening, that she had given away some old toys to the Convalescent Home children, and her own answer: "I am glad you did, grandmother." Bettina must have been among them.

Sobbing bitterly, yet without making any sound, Elsa turned off the light and crept into bed. She felt so lonely and wretched that she could not go to sleep. After awhile, she climbed out of bed and stood in front of the row of dolls on the white couch between the windows. She chose the smallest of these dolls, the one which was most like Bettina, held her for a moment, then kissed her, put her down and crept back to bed. Much as she missed Bettina, she could not bear to take another doll in her place. Again the child fell to sobbing in an agony of loneliness.

She heard the great clock in the hall chime nine; a moment after, Cummings closed the door of her own room. When the chimes rang out the half-

hour, Mrs. Danforth's steps came up the polished front stairs, passed Elsa's door, and Elsa heard her grandmother's door close. Soon the house was quiet, save for the sound of heavy breathing from Cummings's room. Cummings could be noiseless by day but not by night.

Elsa felt that she could not stay in bed another moment. She sprang out and went again to the row of dolls. Looking out of the window, she saw a shadow pass across the thin lace curtains of the Warrens' library windows, — a shadow which she knew must be Miss Ruth's.

A desperate hope of comfort flashed into Elsa's mind. Without a moment's delay, she slipped her little bare feet into her white, fur-lined bedroom shoes, put on the thick, long, white bathrobe which hung over a chair, and softly opened her door. Then with a quick-beating heart but without any thought of fear, she crept down the stairs, took a great fur cape of her grandmother's from the hall, undid the front-door latch, left the door ajar, and ran down the steps, in the faint moonlight, and across the dry grass of the lawn to the Warrens' house.

Ruth Warren had just put out the lights in the library and was fastening back the curtains when

she saw the strange little figure speeding toward her house. "Fairy or elf or child, — who is it, I wonder?" she said to herself. There was something so distressful-looking in the little hurrying figure that she did not wait for the bell to ring.

"Why, Elsa dear, what is the trouble?" she asked, drawing the child into the hall.

Elsa clung to Miss Ruth, sobbing in heart-broken fashion.

"Has anything happened to your grandmother?"

"No, O, no, — not that — I've lost —" but sobs drowned the words.

"Have your cry out, dear, and then tell me about it." Miss Ruth led Elsa into the library, drew a chair in front of the fireplace where the coals were yet glowing brightly, unfastened the heavy fur cape and took the slender little white-gowned figure into her arms.

The comfort of being told to cry all she wanted to, and of having kind arms around her soon quieted Elsa's sobs.

With only a little break in her voice, now and then, she told the story of her loss, feeling, with a child's sure intuition, that Miss Ruth understood. "It is — so hard," she said with a final sigh, hiding

her face against the friendly shoulder; "I have had Bettina ever since nurse went away."

"I know it is hard, dear," Miss Ruth softly stroked the yellow hair. "What shall we do?"

That "we" was so comforting.

"I — I s'pose I must get along without her," said Elsa, sitting upright. The quivering lips and tear-dimmed violet-gray eyes told the grief in her heart, but her bravery was conquering now.

"How old are you, Elsa?" asked Miss Ruth.

"Almost twelve."

Miss Ruth wisely waited.

There was a tender apology in Elsa's voice when she spoke again: "Grandmother didn't know about Bettina. She doesn't know how lonesome I am."

Then Elsa turned and looked eagerly into Miss Ruth's face: "Is your room over the library?"

"Yes, right over this room."

Elsa slipped off from Miss Ruth's lap to the arm of the chair: "I — I think I could go back now and go to sleep — without Bettina — if you would just leave one curtain up a little wee bit so as I could know you — you thought about me — once in awhile," she said slowly. "I — I shouldn't feel so lonely then, — 'cause from where my bed is I can look right out to the window where there is a tall

green vase — I thought maybe it was your room."

"I will leave that curtain up a little way every night, Elsa, and I will put a rose in that vase to-night, especially for you, so that you can see the shadow on the curtain," said Miss Ruth, rising.

"O, will you?" The silvery voice was eloquent with gratitude. As Elsa raised her head she suddenly felt very tired and sleepy. Indeed, the child was almost worn out.

"Now, Elsa, I am going to bring you a glass of milk and then go home with you," said Miss Ruth. "Just think how alarmed your grandmother would be if she should miss you."

"O, I know she hasn't missed me," exclaimed Elsa. "She never thinks about me, I am sure, after I go to bed." And Miss Ruth left the child sitting up with shining eyes and a bright red spot on each cheek.

Elsa was drinking the milk just as the clock struck ten. Quite as if her grandmother had told her to come home at exactly ten o'clock, she slipped down from the chair, pulled the great fur cape over her shoulders, and waited in the hall, a brave little figure with a flushed face, while Miss Ruth put on her red golf cape.

Miss Ruth fastened the long fur cape securely

around Elsa, — for the night air was chilling cold, — opened the front door, and, before the child realized it, took her up, a soft, furry bundle and a heavy one, — and ran with her across the strip of lawn. The door of the Danforth house was ajar.

"Hush, be very quiet, dear, or we shall wake your grandmother," she said, dropping the furry bundle on the top step of the Danforth veranda and kissing the warm, sleepy face. "Lock the door safely, and go straight to bed and to sleep."

But Elsa stopped long enough to whisper into Miss Ruth's ear: "Thank you ever and ever so much."

Almost as soon as Elsa had put down the latch, left the fur cape in the hall and crept up-stairs to bed, she saw a light in Miss Ruth's room and one window shade raised just a little. Even while her eyes were fixed upon the shadow of a rose against the curtain, she fell fast asleep and dreamed that her Uncle Ned came in the shape of a great gray owl, and rescued her out of a white-walled dungeon.

CHAPTER III

WHAT THE WOODS GAVE

The world is so full of a number of things,
I am sure we should all be as happy as kings.
— *Robert Louis Stevenson.*

"I WISH we could walk out to the Convalescent Home this afternoon," were Betty's first words when the three girls reached Miss Ruth's house the next Friday, all very much out of breath from their haste. "I am tired, school has been so dull and stupid," said Betty, "and my head aches. Please can we go?" Betty, from at first not wanting to go to the Convalescent Home, now wanted very much to go, for, since then, Alice had been telling her more about it.

"Would you like to take the walk this afternoon, Elsa?" Miss Ruth inquired. "Is your grandmother willing for you to go?"

"Yes, Miss Ruth," replied Elsa; "I asked grandmother about it this noon, and she said if you thought it was all right, I might go any time."

Miss Ruth turned next to Alice: "Does it suit you, Alice?"

Alice also was eager for the visit, so Miss Ruth decided that there could be no better time. The three girls were tired and fagged from their school, and fresh air would do them more good than staying indoors. The afternoon was sunshiny, the ground bare of snow, and outdoors looked very tempting. And it was, moreover, the day after Thanksgiving, when children do not always feel at their best.

"We will take a lunch with us, — unless you would rather have it now," suggested Miss Ruth. As no one seemed to be hungry now, the lunch plan met with general favour.

"Excuse me then," said Miss Ruth, "and I will have Sarah put something in a box for us."

"And I will run home and get my thick coat," said Betty, who had worn only a light jacket. "It may be cold coming back, and such a tender little plant as I am mustn't take cold." In fact, however, Betty wanted to tell her mother where she was going, as she did not have permission for this particular day, as Elsa had.

Sarah Judd sat in the tidy kitchen knitting a white stocking, her needles keeping time with her

bobbing curls, her black cat on the table by her elbow. At Ruth Warren's words: "I want a lunch for my little people, Sarah," the woman snapped out: "I declare for it, I'm glad you are goin' to do it yourself. I'm tired of waitin' on a pack of children that make so many crumbs — "

"Now, Sarah, you know you like having the children come here," interrupted Miss Ruth. "We are going for a walk to-day, as it happens. Is there bread enough for sandwiches?"

"Yes;" Sarah made her needles go very fast.

"And cookies enough for four children?"

"Yes." Then Sarah, who could not make her needles go any faster, jumped up with stiff quickness, exclaiming: "Land sakes! let me do it. I know what children like; you go 'way an' I'll surprise you and them, too," — which was exactly what the mistress of the house had been waiting for Sarah to say.

She ran up-stairs to tell her Aunt Virginia goodbye. When she came into the library again, she found that Betty had returned and that the three girls were standing around the centre-table where the dolls were, trying to decide which they should dress next.

"Girls, Aunt Virginia wants to see you, because

she has heard so much about the Club," said Miss Ruth.

"You haven't told her the name, have you?" Betty asked anxiously, as they followed Miss Ruth up-stairs.

"O, no! I just call it 'the Club' when I speak of it."

"That's the way I do," Betty said, encouragingly, running on ahead.

Miss Virginia Warren was accustomed to take extremely good care of herself. To-day she was sitting in a large easy chair with soft cushions all around her and a dark blue afghan over her knees. She was about sixty years old, a large, rather heavy-looking woman, very pale because she did not like fresh air in her room and never went out-of-doors in cold weather; and indeed, she took as little exercise as possible all times of the year, because she lived in constant fear of bringing on heart trouble. Her face, though white, was very fair, and her brown eyes — in colour and in a quick way she had of raising them — were like Ruth Warren's, but there the likeness ended, for the aunt's eyes had a wilful expression; her mouth also had a selfish droop at the corners.

Miss Virginia was dressed in a light blue wrap-

per, much trimmed with white lace. She shook hands with each of the three girls, — she had large, handsome hands, but without much life in them, — then she looked the girls over as if they were a row of dolls.

"They seem like bright little children," she said slowly, turning to Ruth Warren, her voice sounding as if she lifted a weight with her chest at each breath; "but they look so well and strong and so full of life," — here Betty stopped twisting herself, — "so full of life, Ruth," went on the slow voice, "that I should think they would tire you all out."

Miss Virginia, who had leaned forward slightly while she spoke, sank back among her pillows. "They may go now," she said, with a wave of her large, white hand in the direction of the embarrassed children; "I am tired already," she repeated, "and you know almost anything brings on heart trouble."

Ruth Warren had heard this remark hundreds of times in the three years since she had offered a home to this aunt who was alone in the world; but she was unfailingly kind to the fanciful woman. "Yes, Aunt Virginia, you must be careful," she said, motioning for the children to go down-stairs.

"Remember, Aunt Virginia, Sarah will come to

you instantly any moment you ring for her," said Ruth Warren, stopping to arrange her aunt's pillows more comfortably, and kissing her on the forehead. But the slow yet vigorous voice followed her out of the door: "I am growing so feeble, Ruth, that I soon must have a regular nurse to stay with me, especially when you are out."

The three girls were unusually quiet when Ruth Warren joined them, for her aunt had made them feel as if they were very troublesome.

"What shall we do about the dolls' dresses, our work to-day?" the Club president asked cheerfully.

"We might each make two at home," Betty found voice to say, for the Club: "Alice might take hers now, and Elsa and I can call for ours."

So Alice chose two pink-and-white gingham dresses, rolled them into a little bundle and put them into the pocket of her blue coat, while Elsa and Betty looked on, embarrassed and quiet, even now.

But when Miss Ruth had put on the brown fur-trimmed coat and hat which matched her brown dress, and the three girls were once out in the open air, the shadow cast upon their spirits by Miss Virginia vanished entirely. Each one begged to carry the straw hand-bag containing the lunch, and they

finally agreed to carry it by turns, beginning with Elsa, the oldest.

"You have to pass my house to go to the Convalescent Home, and there are dogs out that way," suggested Alice, running on ahead and looking back at the others.

"I will take a stick," said Elsa.

"I will take my feet," exclaimed Betty.

"We can stop at my house and ask Ben to go with us," Alice said. "He had to hurry home from school to do errands for mamma, but I think he will have them finished now. He knows all the dogs, and they all know him."

A few moments' walk took the Club into Berkeley Avenue, a long, wooded road curving ahead. Soon the surroundings grew more and more countrylike. The road ran past wide farm-fields and comfortable homes with lazy cows standing in the barn-yards and busy hens scratching in the deserted gardens. Along the roadside, tall oak and chestnut trees met in noble arches; all around was the faint rustle of dried leaves and the soft swaying of bending branches.

"How far is it to where we are going?" asked Betty, impatiently, turning to Alice.

"It's a half-mile from my house," answered

Alice, "and we are almost to my house. It's that little one with a lot of windows."

"We have come more than a half mile," said Miss Ruth, "so it must be Betty's turn to carry the straw bag."

Betty took the bag, and darted along the road, here and there, to the great risk of the lunch.

They were soon in front of the small wooden house, well back from the road, and having a great many windows full of flowers. Ben, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, was splitting kindling-wood at the side of the house. He came running down to meet them.

"Going to the Convalescing Home? Yes, I can go, too," he said, pulling down his shirt-sleeves. "I've done the errands, and was splitting kindlings just for fun."

"Won't you please come into my house, Miss Ruth?" asked Alice, shyly. "Mamma said she wanted the Club to meet here sometime. She would like to see you now, I know."

"We will come, sometime, Alice; thank you," replied Miss Ruth, "but not to-day. We have to be back home before dark."

So Alice ran in to speak to her mother and to

leave the dolls' dresses, just as Ben came hurrying out, buttoning his tight little blue jacket.

"I might hitch up Jerry to the delivery wagon and take you that way," suggested Ben.

"No, walking is more fun," said Betty, who always knew exactly what she wanted to do. A moment later Alice ran toward them, waving good-bye to the young-looking woman who stood in the doorway. Betty flourished the lunch-bag wildly in the air, while Miss Ruth and Elsa waved friendly greetings and Ben shouted farewells.

"What a splendid place to live in, Alice, with the woods so near," said Elsa. "I love to walk in the woods and go hunting into bushes, and discover things." Elsa looked with eager eyes at the clumps of scrub-oak and low bushes ahead, beyond the stone wall.

"There are snakes there sometimes, in warm weather," said timid Alice.

"I'm not afraid of snakes," Elsa said.

"I love 'em, — the cunning little ones," cried Betty; which was true, for Betty loved almost everything that was alive.

"I will tell you a very short story about a friend of mine," said Miss Ruth. The children fell into

line at once, Betty and Elsa on the right, Ben and Alice on the left.

"I was in a small country town one summer with this friend," Miss Ruth began, "and some one asked her to take a Sunday-school class of boys who were full of mischief and fun. For awhile, that first Sunday, everything went well; then, just as my friend was explaining the lesson to the boys at one side, she felt something drop into her lap, and turning, she saw a little green snake. Those boys looked at her, expecting at least that she would scream. The snake wriggled and tried to escape, but the boy who had brought him was too quick, and grasped the snake; and he was so surprised when the teacher said: 'That isn't the way to hold him. Don't you see you are making him uncomfortable?' So she took hold of him."

"The boy or the snake?" asked Ben, quick as a flash.

"The snake," said Miss Ruth, answering the laugh in Ben's eyes. "And she held him — the snake, I mean — for ten or fifteen minutes, talking about him until those boys thought she was the nicest teacher they had ever had."

"Could you have done that, Miss Ruth?" asked Betty.

But just then a large black and white hound bounded from the porch of a house they were passing and ran with great leaps toward them, baying in a deep voice.

"Tinker! Tinker!" called Ben, darting forward. Alice drew around to the other side of Miss Ruth, while Elsa and even Betty stepped a little behind.

"Tinker!" exclaimed Ben again, in a steady tone. "Come here! Don't you bark at my Black Lace Lady!"

The great hound, on hearing Ben's voice, had stopped short. Now, with eyes cast down, he walked meekly to Ben, who put out his hand and stroked the long, soft ears, saying: "Bad old Tinker, aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

As Alice had said, Ben was friends with all the dogs on the road. The hound, after walking a few steps with Ben's hand on his head, turned and went toward his home.

"I wasn't a bit afraid," said Betty, coming forward again.

Ben gave a low whistle to express his thoughts. The others were politely silent.

"What was it you called Miss Ruth, Ben?" Betty asked quickly.

"Black Lace Lady," Ben answered, "because

she had on a black lace dress the first time I ever saw her, and it was pretty."

"Ben always names people," said Alice. "He calls me Peggy most of the time."

"What is your name for me, Ben?" asked Betty, dancing on ahead.

"You?" Ben looked at her brown curls and bright eyes for a half moment and then said: "I am going to call you the Glad Girl."

"That's nice," Betty said, with an extra swing of the lunch-bag. "Mother calls me Sunshine sometimes — and sometimes the Tornado. What's your name for Elsa?"

Ben thought a moment: "I haven't any name for Elsa yet: I am saving that up." Then he gazed at Miss Ruth anxiously: "Isn't it Alice's turn to carry that straw bag?" Alice had found time to explain to him about the lunch. "We can take shorter turns now, 'cause I can carry it, too."

So the bag was given into Alice's keeping.

"Tell us about the place where we are going, Miss Ruth, please?" asked Elsa, who was enjoying the woods walk so much that she had kept quiet most of the way.

"To begin with," replied Miss Ruth, "there is

a large hospital in the city, especially for children; but large as it is, there are always more sick children to be taken into it than there is room for. When the children in the hospital are getting well, they are brought out here to the Convalescent Home where they can be cared for before going to their own homes, — which are sometimes very poor homes. And the life out here, with the sunshine and the fresh air and good care, makes the children ever and ever so much stronger. There are about seventy or eighty children here all the time."

"Poor little children," said Elsa. Betty was walking along quietly now, and Ben had taken Alice's blue-mittened hand in his.

"Yes, poor little children," Miss Ruth repeated. "The happy part of it all is, though, that the children are growing stronger. But just think how they have to go without the playing and running about you all can have. Once a little girl, seven years old, whom I saw out here, and who couldn't walk, said: 'I used to play when I was young.'"

"There's the house now," exclaimed Alice, as they came within sight of a large red-brick building with many red chimneys, situated quite far back from the highway.

Just where the road turned toward the comfortable-looking red house stood a tall, wooden sign with the words:

CONVALESCENT HOME
OF THE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL
VISITORS ALWAYS WELCOME

"Doesn't that sound pleasant?" said Betty, reading it aloud. "It makes you feel as though they really want you to come."

Miss Ruth had been here many times before, so she sent a message to the head-nurse by the maid who opened the front door: "Tell Miss Hartwell that we would like to see her when she is at liberty, and that I have taken my young friends out to the play-room. How many children have you here this week?"

"About seventy-five, Miss Warren," replied the maid, conducting the little party through the large, airy hall with its light yellow-green walls and dark wood finish, and along a wide passageway to the play-room.

The three girls went on in silence, except that Elsa said to Miss Ruth: "What a lovely, clean place it is!"

Soon they found themselves in a large room —

which seemed almost like outdoors, it was so light and pleasant — and in the midst of a great many children, most of whom were upon one crutch or two crutches, or had bandages upon their feet, arms, or even their whole bodies.

"There are over forty children here in the play-room," said the white-capped nurse who had stepped forward to answer Miss Ruth's greeting. "The stronger children have been out-of-doors in the fresh air; — but see, they are coming in now," she added. "Miss Hartwell has them come in half an hour before their supper time."

Sliding glass doors led from the play-room upon a wide, unroofed piazza. And now, through the open doorway, a tall, slender woman led the long line of children, who limped or pushed themselves along on go-carts; only a few, even, of these stronger children could walk in the straight, free fashion in which ordinary boys and girls walk, when they have full use of their limbs.

"How happy they all look," said Elsa; and indeed, the children's faces, though in many cases thin and pathetic-looking, were sweet, patient and sunshiny.

"They always look just the same, every time I come here," Alice said; then she ran off to speak

with a little girl whom she remembered. Ben was already in a corner, surrounded by a group of boys.

While Miss Ruth went on talking with the head nurse, Betty and Elsa forgot their shyness, — which was easy, because the children came crowding around them, with lively interest. To Betty, who was used to her own baby brother, the most natural thing to do seemed to be to sit down on the floor and play with the smallest ones. Elsa, heeding the "Go walk! Go walk!" of two little girls, wandered away with one holding fast to each hand. When the little girls grew tired, as they did quickly, Elsa came back to Miss Ruth's side, with shining, eloquent gray eyes: "They are so friendly, the dear little things," she said to Miss Ruth, then walked slowly away, with two other girls, to a group of children who were strapped down to go-carts, and flat upon their backs.

A mite of five years, with round blue eyes and a pale, patient face, held out both hands toward Elsa's sunshiny yellow hair, saying "Pitty, O, pitty!" Just beyond, a little boy was turning his head toward the window. "What are you looking at?" Elsa asked, as she drew near.

"At the sky; it's nice up there," the boy answered contentedly.

By his side, on the next go-cart, a small girl was singing to herself a nursery-verse Elsa knew; so she stopped and joined in the singing:

"Come, little leaves," said the wind one day,
"Come over the meadow with me and play;
Put on your dresses of red and gold,
For winter is come and the days grow cold."

Elsa's baby companions, tired of walking, dropped down in little patient heaps upon the floor, saying in soft voices: "Sing more! More song!"

"Oh!"

Miss Ruth turned at Elsa's exclamation and saw her kneeling by the side of a child of about seven years, who was hugging an old, battered china doll. The child was strapped to a frame which held her body straight, because her back was not like other children's. "Let me hold your dolly a moment," Elsa was saying, although Ruth Warren could not hear the words.

"No! No! Dirl take dolly 'way!" cried the little girl, who had a ruddy face and dark, sparkling eyes.

Miss Ruth, still talking with the head-nurse, watched Elsa, unheeded by her.

"Where did you get the dolly?" Elsa asked,

longing to take her old doll into her arms, for she had instantly known her own Bettina.

"Lady dave her to me," said the child.

"What is the dolly's name?" asked Elsa.

"Dolly." The child looked up solemnly.

"Don't you want to have a name for her?" Elsa asked, after a half moment of waiting.

"Vhat?" asked the child, clasping her tiny hands the tighter around the doll.

"Name her Bettina," said Elsa, softly.

"'Tina," repeated the little girl. "Dat's dood name. Dat's nursey's name."

"Where is nursey?" Elsa sprang up from her knees and looked around the room at the nurses. All the faces were strange to her. "Where is she?" Elsa asked again, almost in tears.

"Don 'way," said the wee little girl. And, leaving her staring with two very bright eyes at the doll, Elsa went back to Miss Ruth's side and took hold of her hand tightly.

"You ought to be here some day when new children come," said the head-nurse kindly, noticing Elsa's sober face, "and see how those who have been here longest crowd around and tell the new children about the nice things they do here. It makes the new children feel happy and at home,

immediately, so that they are hardly ever homesick. Sometimes after the children are well, they don't want to go home. One little girl used to run and hide every time we spoke of her going home."

"I don't wonder," Elsa said quickly. "It's so pleasant here for them."

"Would you like to see where almost all the children sleep?" asked the head-nurse, now that Elsa's face had brightened.

"Yes, indeed," Elsa said. Then Miss Ruth called the other members of the Club, and they followed Miss Hartwell into one after another of the three rooms, or "shacks," which reached out, like arms, from the play-room; and Miss Hartwell showed them how the windows and even the doors could be moved so as to let plenty of fresh air into the shacks; she said that the children never complained of feeling cold, for they were bundled up in flannel clothing and hoods at night. Some of the children limped along, following the visitors from one shack into the next, and listening, nodded their heads with great interest while Miss Hartwell made the explanation.

"You would enjoy coming here sometime on a kindergarten afternoon," continued the head-nurse. "We have kindergarten teaching three times a

week — Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday afternoon — and no baby is too small and no child too helpless, to take some part, real or make-believe, in the pretty plays."

Immediately, one little boy, who had heard the word "kindergarten" held up a piece of cardboard which had outlined upon it a yellow carrot with a bright green top. And they all praised it.

"Now I will show you the dining-room," said Miss Hartwell, leading the way back through the long passage and the pleasant hall. And, then, if Elsa had dared, she would have questioned about the nurse named Bettina; but Elsa was a shy little girl, and before she found courage for the question, they were in the large, many-windowed dining-room with its tall, handsome plants and wide fireplace, and Miss Hartwell was showing them the pretty dishes with red, green, and blue figures, for the children's use. The room was filled with low tables surrounded by low chairs, and on the tables were plates piled with buttered bread and crackers, while in front of each place was a large cupful of milk and a dish of apple-sauce.

"The children have supper very early on winter afternoons," Miss Hartwell said. She had hardly spoken these words when the long procession of

children began coming into the dining-room, — the stronger ones first, sometimes leading or helping the weaker ones, then those who could not walk, pushing themselves along on their go-carts. Last of all came the nurses with the youngest and weakest children.

The visitors drew somewhat to one side and watched the children as they took their places or were drawn up to the tables.

At a signal from the head-nurse after each little white bib was tied into place, the children began singing in thin, sweet voices:

"Thank Him, thank Him,
All ye little children;
Thank Him, thank Him,
God is love."

Elsa's and Betty's eyes filled with tears; the children's grace touched Alice's and Ben's hearts into tenderness, too, although the twins had heard it before; then they all dried their eyes, smiling through joyful tears, as the children began to eat their supper.

"Sometimes we have gingerbread for supper," said a sweet-faced child who was lying on a go-cart near the visitors, and whom one of the nurses was feeding.

"Tum aden," cried the bright-eyed little girl who, as the visitors turned to go, was hugging an old china doll, and patiently waiting her turn to be fed.

"You cunning baby!" said Elsa, stooping to kiss the battered doll, once her own.

So half-laughing, half-crying, the children passed out, their hearts overflowing with a kind of painful pleasure.

They kept unusually quiet for the first few moments as they walked away. Elsa was the first one to speak. "I want to come again," she said in a wistful voice. It had been hard for her to leave her precious old doll behind; and besides, the children interested her greatly.

"So do I," Betty joined in quickly. "It makes me feel queer, but I like it."

"I love to come," said Alice. "Sometimes we take things out to the children; and you'd be s'prised the way they give up to each other. Mamma says they are the most unselfishest children she ever saw."

Ben was trotting along ahead, jumping every now and then into the air. Suddenly he stopped and said in a serious voice: "I am glad my two

legs are whole! My, — but it's hard for those boys, though."

"It's just as hard for the girls," exclaimed Betty.

"No, — because boys need to race around more than girls; it keeps them from exploding," declared Ben, taking an extra high jump.

"I know a short way through the woods," he added, stopping where a foot-path led from the left-hand side of the road. "It comes out just beyond our house; it's pretty, too, and I can take you to a fine place to eat the lunch." Ben was growing hungry.

Miss Ruth had kept the lunch-bag, insisting that it was her turn to carry it now. They all agreed to follow Ben's suggestion; and indeed it was delightful to be walking along under broad-spreading trees through whose branches the late afternoon sunlight struck golden lances. There was an almost perfect stillness in the woods, except for the occasional calling of crows overhead among the tree-tops or the Jay! Jay! of that handsome robber, the blue-jay.

"How does the Convalescent Home have money enough to take care of all those children?" asked Elsa, sliding along, on the smooth carpet of pine-needles, toward Miss Ruth.

"The managers, the ladies who have charge of the Home, give money and their friends give money, to provide the clothing — shoes and stockings and nightgowns and little flannel dresses and everything, — besides paying the nurses' wages and for the medicines. It takes a great deal of money; and ever so many more children could be brought here and cured if there were more money to provide care and clothing for them."

"Perhaps my grandmother will give something," Elsa said hesitatingly. "O, I know," she added, her face brightening, "Uncle Ned will help. I will ask him."

"I am glad we are going to give the children some dolls; they didn't have many," said Betty, rustling on ahead through the piled-up dry leaves.

"We might earn some money — our Club, I mean," suggested Alice.

"We will give them all the dolls and playthings we can for Christmas," said Elsa, putting her arm around Alice; "then, when we start a new club, we can maybe have it an Easter Club, and see how much money we can earn for those poor little children."

"Alice and I had our names printed in the Convalescing Home report last year," Ben called back

over his shoulder; he was leading the way. "It said this: 'From Ben and Alice, a music-box;' we gave them one we had," he explained.

"Will the dolls we give and the name of our Club be printed in the report, Miss Ruth?" asked Betty excitedly.

"Yes, that is the custom," answered Miss Ruth.

"But then everybody would know the name," objected Betty, walking slowly on.

"Never mind," Alice said, putting her arm into Betty's. "We can name the Club over again after Christmas."

"And we wouldn't want to call an Easter Club by the same name as a Christmas Club," said Elsa.

"What's the name of the Club, anyway?" Ben turned to ask. He was marching on ahead, but not losing anything that was said. "Alice told me I couldn't know it till I belonged, but I belong now."

"Yes, you belong now, after having this afternoon's meeting with us," said Miss Ruth. "Tell him the name, Alice."

So Alice ran ahead, put her arm around Ben's neck, and whispered the name into his ear, — although there was no need of secrecy, since they all were members.

"Christmas Makers' Club!" Ben said critically.

"That sounds pretty important, as though you thought you were going to make Christmas."

"But we are," cried Elsa; "we are going to help make it for the convalescent children."

"And for ourselves, too," put in Betty, who had many plans in her busy brain.

"Aren't you going to help make it for anybody, Ben?" asked Miss Ruth.

"O, — yes," replied Ben, with the air of one who did not tell all of his secrets.

"He can make the beautifullest things," said Alice, ever ready to praise her brother.

"I'll make a few tops and some kites for those little chaps," Ben said modestly, slowing his steps in order to walk with the others, for here the wood-path widened. "I used to think I would be a carpenter when I grow up, but I've changed my mind."

"What do you want to do, Ben?" asked Miss Ruth, looking at the lively-faced boy whose head came almost to her shoulder.

Ben was a steady-minded, faithful lad, but he had a great imagination. "I am going to do the way they do in fairy stories," he said; "I am going to get an old witch to help, and go to an island where there is a hidden treasure and come back and spend

it. And I shall have a pony and a guinea pig and a garden of my own, and then I shall make the King a great many presents, and marry the Princess and have plenty of people to amuse me and read to me, and I shall go to bed when I choose and eat all the candy I want and have turkey every day, and I shall conquer all the world, — all except the Americans, — and my mother will be Queen — " Here Ben stopped for want of breath rather than for want of imagination.

" That is enough to take away one's breath, Ben," remarked Miss Ruth. " What do you want to be, Alice? You must all tell."

" I want to be a nurse and take care of the convalescent children," Alice said shyly.

" You will be a princess if you are my sister," exclaimed Ben.

" What about you, Betty? " Miss Ruth asked next.

" Me! I want to be good and beautiful and sensible," said Betty, very slowly, for her; " and, of course, I want a houseful of horses and a houseful of dogs."

" And you, Elsa? "

Elsa was all ready for Miss Ruth's question:

"I am going to be the mother of five children and make them very, very happy," she said with a most radiant expression on her flower-like face.

"Let's stop here and build a bower to eat the lunch in," exclaimed Betty, for all at once they came to a turn in the path and an open space, carpeted with soft, reddish-brown pine needles, and surrounded by tall, straight tree trunks.

"Walk on a minute more," urged Ben; "I know a lots better place."

Soon another turn in the path brought them within sight of a hut, which the dense trees had hidden, — a low, wooden cabin, built of logs with the bark left on. In front of the hut was a wooden platform with a long seat, and above the seat, one wide window of many small panes of glass. It was a place to attract and charm any child.

With shouts of excitement, Betty, Elsa, and Alice, followed by Ben, leaped to the platform and the girls pressed their faces against the window, full of curiosity to see the inside of the hut.

"Nobody lives here," explained Ben, turning to Miss Ruth, who was only a moment behind the others. "Some boys' father had the hut built for them two-three years ago, but they have grown up and got tired of it. They let me have the key," he added,

proudly taking it from his pocket and fitting it into the door.

"I have been here before with Ben, but not very often," said Alice, standing aside with her brother to let the others go into the hut first.

Inside, the delighted children saw a room about as large as a good-sized pantry, and in this room a round table, three stools, a chair, and a tiny, rather rusty stove; opening from this room was a smaller one, with two cot-beds. The whole place was clean and in order, for Ben had taken great delight not only in having the key but in caring for the hut.

There was a sweet, dry odour of pine-wood about the place, and the afternoon sun had made the large room quite warm. "We must surely have our lunch here," said Miss Ruth, "though we must be quick about it, for the sunlight will soon be gone."

"Just seats enough to go around," said Ben; "three stools for the girls, a chair for Miss Ruth — excuse me, Miss Ruth, I ought to have said you first, — and I'll get the wooden box that I keep in the bushes for rubbish."

Miss Ruth quickly spread a white napkin over the little table and took out the lunch, — first a great many ginger cookies, and these were carefully laid at one side; buttered thin biscuit next,

three apiece, with slices of cold turkey laid in between, and lastly, some nuts and raisins.

Four pairs of hands reached out without delay, and in a surprisingly short time, sandwiches and cookies, nuts and raisins, every one of them, had vanished. And how good everything tasted, there in the snug, warm little hut, with the fragrant odour of the pines coming in through the open door.

"I wish, if we have the Easter Club, we could buy this hut and have our meetings here," said Elsa. The longer she stayed in the hut, the better she liked it.

"It's near my house," Alice said; "you can see our chimneys from the door."

"And we could furnish the hut with a lot of things, — dishes and pictures," cried Betty. "And we could use the little room for a storeroom!"

Elsa had been thinking of other pleasures, so she said: "We could stay here and enjoy the birds and the trees and the wild flowers, in the spring."

"Do you think we could buy or hire the hut, Ben?" asked Miss Ruth; for it certainly was a delightful place.

"Yes, I think maybe I could manage it for you," replied Ben, carefully brushing all the crumbs

of food into the wooden box on which he had sat during the lunch.

"O, I just saw the cunningest gray squirrel!" exclaimed Elsa, running to the doorway, hoping for another glimpse of the little creature.

"You can see plenty of gray squirrels and chipmunks round here, 'most any time," said Ben, following her. "And a man told me that last year a pair of screech-owls built their nest and raised their family in that old hollow tree there."

Elsa listened with closest attention.

"This is a fine place to get acquainted with birds and animals," Ben said, encouragingly. "But you never can get acquainted with them till you learn to be quiet, like them, and to walk through the woods without making twigs snap every step you take."

Ben put the box of crumbs among the alder bushes at the side of the hut. "Mr. Gray Squirrel and his family will have those crumbs almost before we are out of sight," he said.

"We must start for home," called Miss Ruth, coming out from the hut with Alice and Betty.

While Ben locked the door, the others stood for a moment watching the brilliant red sunset light in the western sky. The deep baying of a hound

sounded through the quiet woods. Alice drew a little nearer to Ben.

"You are all safe, Peggy," he said, patting her hand, his thoughts busy with other things. "If I were a bird way up in the top boughs of those tall trees, you would look like grasshoppers down here," he said, with his face turned to the sky.

"And you would look like the teentiest, tontiest little bird," replied Betty quickly.

"I should hear what the wind was saying, 'way up there," Ben went on; "we can't hear such things down on the ground, 'cause people make so much noise talking. You have to keep still to learn things," added Ben with a wise air and a serious face. Then he led the way along the path again, singing to himself softly, in a musical voice:

> **"There was an old man of Dumbree,**
> **Who taught little owls to drink tea;**
> **For he said, 'To eat mice is not proper or nice,'**
> **That amiable man of Dumbree."**

Soon the very tall trees grew fewer in number and the woods more open; and the path now ran between old stumps, tufts of blueberry bushes, clumps of alders, and wisps of coarse yellow-brown grass, left unweakened by the frost. A few moments later, they came out upon Berkeley Avenue,

at a point where Ben and Alice would have to turn back toward their home.

"Thank you, very much, Ben, for bringing us through such an interesting, pleasant way," said Miss Ruth; "and we shall all remember the hut."

"And the convalescent children," cried Elsa.

"And the Easter Club we are going to have," put in Betty. "Don't you tell the name of our Club, Ben!"

"No, no, no!" Ben called back, — as if a boy ever did tell secrets.

"Mamma wants the Club to meet at our house sometime soon," Alice said in farewell, as she and Ben trotted off together.

Ben waved his scrap of a blue cap as he cried: "Good-bye, good-bye, Black Lace Lady! Good-bye, Glad Girl! Good-bye, Elsa!"

"Have you thought of a name for Elsa yet?" called out Betty, waving the now empty lunch-bag over her head frantically.

"That's telling!" Ben answered teasingly. He had thought, but he was going to keep it to himself for awhile.

Miss Ruth, Betty, and Elsa, had not gone far on their homeward way when Mrs. Danforth overtook them, in a closed coupé with a driver in livery,

who stopped the gray horse beside the group in the road. Mrs. Danforth had very often, lately, driven out on Berkeley Avenue, and several times in passing the Holts' house she had seen a stooping-shouldered man, whom she supposed to be Mr. Holt, going to or coming from the long shed, the place where, probably, she thought, the market garden supplies were kept. The garden window frames showed just behind the house.

"Where are the others of your Club?" she asked, as she let down the coupé window. She had expected to meet all of the Club together.

"O, we came back through the woods, grandmother," explained Elsa; "you must have met Ben and Alice just now."

Then Mrs. Danforth remembered that she had met a boy and a girl only a short distance back, but she had not noticed them especially.

"I can take one of you home with me," she said, looking from Miss Ruth to Elsa and then to Betty, and pulling her handsome sable furs closer up around her neck as the cool air came into the coupé.

"Thank you, Mrs. Danforth, but I enjoy walking," replied Ruth Warren, who was entirely willing to give up the drive to one of the children.

Elsa's face looked as if she also would rather walk; but Betty's brown eyes were dancing with anticipation. She loved horses heartily, and next to going over the Danforth house she had wanted to ride behind that splendid gray steed. So she said, when Mrs. Danforth's eyes rested upon her: "I should just love to ride with you," and accordingly, Elsa's grandmother drove off with Betty behind the spirited horse.

"Did you know I found a little girl out at the Convalescent Home who — who had Bettina?" Elsa said to Miss Ruth, as they walked along together over the hard, frozen road.

"Was it the little girl with the bright dark eyes, whom I saw you with?"

"Yes, that's the one. Did you hear what she said?" Elsa asked.

"I didn't hear what either you or the little girl said, because I was talking with Miss Hartwell; but I saw that you were greatly interested about something: and it was your own doll Bettina. Were you glad?"

"It — it was exciting to — to see Bettina," Elsa said, swallowing a lump in her throat, "and then when — when I asked the little girl to — let me

name the doll — I wanted her to be called Bettina — the little girl said that her nurse's name was Bettina, but she had gone away. Do you suppose it could be my old Bettina, — Bettina March?" Elsa asked, looking anxiously into Miss Ruth's face, half in hope, half in uncertainty.

"You did not think to inquire of Miss Hartwell?" questioned Miss Ruth.

"I — I thought, but I didn't quite dare to," Elsa replied desolately.

"Don't think too much about the matter, Elsa, because it might be Bettina Smith or Bettina anybody; but I will find out for you," said Miss Ruth, thinking how plucky Elsa had been about the doll.

"O, thank you, Miss Ruth," Elsa said very gratefully and in a much relieved tone.

"Doesn't your old nurse write to you?"

"No," Elsa answered slowly. "Grandmother said it was better for me to learn to get along without Bettina — so — so I suppose that's the reason she doesn't write to me."

Ruth Warren did not ask any further questions. But she felt that she knew better than ever why Elsa was such a pale-faced child and why there was so often a shadow of something sad in her eyes.

"Do you think I ought to tell grandmother about

— about my going over to your house the other night?" Elsa asked suddenly, as the question came into her mind for almost the hundredth time.

"Might not your grandmother's feelings be hurt because you went to somebody else instead of going to her, with your — your trouble?"

"Perhaps," Elsa answered, in a doubtful tone, though.

"If she were to ask you about it, you would of course tell her. But when telling a thing unnecessarily means the possibility of hurting somebody's feelings, then even little girls can help make the world happier by keeping things to themselves. Are you willing, Elsa, to have me tell your grandmother, or anybody else, if ever the time comes when it seems best?"

"Yes, Miss Ruth," cried Elsa, feeling as if a great weight had rolled from her heart. "Of course grandmother didn't know how much I loved that doll. She didn't even know I had her."

After this talk, Elsa felt that she and Miss Ruth were to be good friends for always.

Betty White spent the first few moments of the drive in watching the strong, easy pulling of the gray horse. Then she turned to Mrs. Danforth

with a question which greatly interested her and which she thought there could never be a better time to ask.

Now Betty was the frankest of little girls; so she spoke out very bluntly: "Why do you make Elsa mind so — so hard?"

Mrs. Danforth, being greatly amazed, was surprised into saying "What?"

"Why don't you let Elsa decide things sometimes for herself?" Betty's brown eyes met the surprised look in Mrs Danforth's blue eyes very fearlessly. "Mother lets me decide things — she says it is good for me to have re-responsibleness." Betty stumbled a little over the long word, but she kept on: "So if mother tells me I better come home from anywhere about five o'clock, and if I want to stay a little longer, and they want me to, I just stay, and then I tell her afterward, and if she doesn't like it, we talk it over."

Betty leaned back against the soft cushions in comfort. This matter was off her mind!

Mrs. Danforth did not give any reply.

"I — I think the other way makes children afraid of you," Betty added bravely.

Still Mrs. Danforth kept her eyes straight ahead,

upon the coachman's broad shoulders. Presently she asked: "Was that the Holt children's father in front of their house, Elizabeth?"

"We didn't come back past the Holts' house," Betty replied, "but that couldn't have been Alice's and Ben's father. It must have been the hired man. Mr. Holt is a teacher, and he is way out in the West somewhere, because he isn't very well. They miss him dreadfully."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Danforth. And Betty felt like a naughty child, though she could not have told why.

Betty's mother was just turning toward her home, when Mrs. Danforth's coupé stopped, and Betty flew out like a small whirlwind.

Mrs. Danforth lowered the coupé window and leaning forward, said: "Mrs. White, I wish my little Elsa were as rosy and strong as your Elizabeth." She always spoke Betty's full name, — Elizabeth.

Mrs. White noticed the unusually gentle expression upon the proud face. She had wanted a good opportunity to speak to Mrs. Danforth about Elsa; so, with the same frankness which Betty had shown, she said: "There is no use in trying to

bring children up without love, Mrs. Danforth. You cannot make strong, happy, useful men and women without it."

Mrs. Danforth did not seem offended; though her eyes gleamed proudly from under her heavy brows, and a slight colour rose on her cheeks. Her voice was rather hoarse as she said to Mrs. White, with a cold smile: "Your daughter Elizabeth is very much like you." Then she bowed good-bye, and ordered the coachman to drive on.

"You forgot to thank Mrs. Danforth for the drive, Betty," said Mrs. White, as they walked up the steps together.

"So I did, mother. That is too bad," Betty answered, penitently, slipping her hand into her mother's arm. "But Mrs. Danforth kind of stiffens me up and makes me forget things. Aren't grandmothers ever as nice as mothers? I don't know, because I haven't any grandmothers."

"Yes, Betty, they are often better, or at least children think so. But there are a great many different kinds of mothers and grandmothers."

"I know I've got the best kind of mother!" exclaimed Betty joyfully.

That evening, after Elsa had shaken hands, said good night, and gone up to her white room, Mrs.

Danforth, alone in her luxurious library, sat quiet for a long time, thinking deeply about many things, especially about the real purpose which had brought her to live in Berkeley.

CHAPTER IV

THE CLUB GOES VISITING

By sports like these are all their cares beguiled.
— Oliver Goldsmith.

"I DON'T know but I shall have to ask you not to let the children come to their Club this afternoon. I don't like the noise, and you know almost anything brings on heart trouble," Miss Virginia Warren said, when she came down to the library the next Friday morning, followed by her niece, carrying two shawls. She spent an hour downstairs daily, after the rooms had been made excessively warm.

"But, Aunt Virginia, you always stay in your room after three o'clock, and it is so far from the library that you could hardly hear any noise. I will keep the doors shut, though. I should be sorry indeed to disappoint the children," Ruth Warren replied, quite troubled by her aunt's words.

"Well, of course the children are of more importance than my feelings," said Miss Virginia with

a sigh. "But even though I don't hear their noise, knowing they are there, and that I may hear them any minute, gives me cold turns every now and then." She shivered, as if at the mere thought. "Put that thick shawl over me quickly, Ruth."

The doctor had many times told Ruth Warren that there was nothing really the matter with her aunt except a strong imagination and a constant fear of illness; he had advised her, too, not to give in too much to her aunt's notions. So now Ruth said: "I am sorry, Aunt Virginia, that the children's coming disturbs you. I will ask Sarah to stay in the room with you this afternoon so that you will not feel nervous."

"Nervous! I am never nervous," replied Miss Virginia, waving her large white hands excitedly. "But I shall have to have a regular nurse, so that there will be somebody with me all the time." Then she wept a little, and felt faint, and had to be revived with spirits of ammonia.

Fortunately, however, she was spared further excitement on account of the children's coming that day. For just before three o'clock, Ben Holt drove up to the house with a large, loose-jointed brown horse and a double-seated sleigh, jumped out, rang the door-bell, and asked for Miss Ruth. He was

sitting on a tall carved chair in the hall when Ruth Warren came down, at Sarah's summons.

"I stayed at home from school this afternoon," said Ben, springing to his feet and looking as if his sturdy body would burst out from the tight little blue jacket. "Alice has hurt her ankle, and she wants the Club to meet at our house, and so does my mother, and will you come? I've brought Jerry and the double-seated sleigh. See?" And Ben drew aside the lace curtain of the hall window to display his steed and chariot.

"Yes, I will go with pleasure," Ruth Warren answered, after one swift, amused glance at the big-boned horse and the sleigh.

"Then I'll just wait here till the other children come, if you please," Ben said, unbuttoning his jacket and drawing a long breath.

"Will your horse stand?" asked Ruth Warren, wondering if Ben meant to include her as one of the children.

"O, yes, he's glad enough to have a chance to stand," the boy said with a twinkle of humour.

Ruth Waren went up-stairs to tell her aunt of the change of plan.

"You are not going off with a crowd of children in that old sleigh, Ruth, are you? Some of your

friends will be sure to see you," objected Miss Virginia, in great and sudden distress.

"Only three children, Aunt Virginia; and what if my friends do see me?"

"But it looks so queer — the sleigh, I mean, — like a country grocery sled, with an extra seat put in." Miss Virginia grew quite excited.

"I believe it is called a pung," said Ruth; "never mind, Aunt Virginia, nobody whom I care for will like me any the less for going in it. Good-bye, — there come Betty and Elsa now, and you can watch us start," she added, for her aunt's chair was always drawn close to the front window. "You will have a quiet house all to yourself this afternoon."

"It will be too quiet, I am afraid," sighed Miss Virginia. "I do like to hear a little something going on, here all alone as I am, though not children's voices."

Miss Virginia Warren did not mean to be selfish, but she had never learned that there is something sweeter in life than taking anxious care of one's health and thinking about one's self.

Ben had seen Betty and Elsa on their way home from school and told them; so they were there all

ready to start when Miss Ruth came down-stairs in her long, black, fur-lined coat.

Mrs. Danforth had surprised Elsa that noon by saying: "Elsa, when you are with your little Club, and all of you want to do anything together, like going to the Convalescent Home, you may do it without coming to ask me; and you may stay a little later than five o'clock if coming away earlier would spoil your good time." Elsa felt very grown-up, with this new freedom, and yet the first use she made of it was to run home to tell her grandmother that the Club was to meet at Alice's! It happened, however, that Mrs. Danforth was out driving; and then Elsa felt more than ever grateful to her grandmother, because, as she explained to Miss Ruth, "If grandmother hadn't said I could do anything the Club wanted to, I couldn't have gone to Alice's, because grandmother wasn't at home to ask."

Betty listened intently, but wisely kept still. She was dancing around in great impatience for the start; she had on a long gray fur boa of her mother's, and as there had been no one to remind Elsa to wear something extra warm, Miss Ruth bundled her into the dark red golf cape.

Soon the little party set forth, — to Miss Vir-

ginia's horror, though she waved her hand feebly in return to the merry farewells from Miss Ruth and Elsa on the back seat of the pung, and from Betty perched up beside the blue-coated driver of the loose-jointed horse.

Ben began clucking his steed into a faster gait.

"What a good, steady horse you have, Ben," said Miss Ruth; and indeed the horse was pulling well on the road toward home.

"It's a good thing to have a horse that will stand and that people aren't afraid of," Ben said loyally. "I can do anything with this horse. G'long, Jerry!"

The old horse, as if to justify the praise, went briskly. The sleighing was smooth, for there had been two or three snow-storms the past week. It was a rather sharp and wintry afternoon, cloudy, with every once in awhile a flurry of snow in large, star-shaped flakes.

"See how well Nature has tucked her children in, since we walked out here a week ago," said Miss Ruth, as the sleigh, with merrily jingling bells, slid along the quieter part of Berkeley Avenue, where now masses of soft snow lined the road-side. "And there will soon be a thicker blanket put on, to keep them warm and safe until spring."

"Think of the hut, all covered with snow," Elsa said. "How pretty it must look."

"Wouldn't it be fun if we could sleigh-ride over to the Convalescent Home and see the children again," exclaimed Betty, remembering the last Friday afternoon and their visit.

"But what about Alice waiting at home for us?" Miss Ruth asked quickly.

"O, I forgot," Betty cried.

"I expect she's wondering where we are," exclaimed Ben. "G'long, Jerry!"

But Jerry did not need urging now, for a moment later Ben turned into the driveway which led to the rambling house with a piazza in front, out upon which looked many long, narrow windows, filled with bright-flowering plants, chiefly scarlet geraniums, — a cozy, cheerful home indeed.

Mrs. Holt was already at the front door, — a young woman in a plain dark blue dress with dainty lace collar and cuffs, and so slender and graceful that she looked more like an older sister of Ben's than his mother. Quite a warm colour bloomed on her pretty face as she shook hands with Miss Ruth, whom Ben introduced by saying "This is the Black Lace Lady."

"I am very happy to meet you, Miss Warren.

Betty White I already know. And this is Elsa Danforth? Come in, please. Alice has been growing very impatient for your arrival," Mrs. Holt said, with a gentle and well-bred hospitality.

The front door opened directly into a quite large hall, evidently the living-room. There was a glowing fire in the old-fashioned fireplace opposite the door, a low bookcase on one side of the fireplace and a piano on the other; the stairs were at one end of the room, and folding-doors opened into the dining-room at the opposite end. On a chintz-covered lounge close to the front windows sat Alice in a blue wrapper the colour of her eyes, and with one foot stretched out, covered with an afghan. Her face flushed with pleasure: "O, I am so glad you all came," she said, as they drew around her. "I fell on some ice, coming home from school yesterday, and twisted my ankle a little, the doctor said, so I couldn't come to the Club, and so we invited you here. What shall we do?" she asked, leaning back against the gay chintz pillows and looking like a large, sweet-faced doll with softly dimpled cheeks.

"I brought some of the dolls' dresses — there are yet eight more to make," Miss Ruth said, taking a package from the deep pocket of her fur-

lined coat. "We can sew on those for one thing to do."

"I have made my last week's two dresses," cried Alice, pulling them in very rumpled condition from under a sofa pillow, while Elsa and Betty dived into their coat pockets, each bringing out two dresses, all finished.

"Good!" said Miss Ruth, taking off her coat and hat, at Mrs. Holt's bidding. "Perhaps we can each do two to-day — though these are for the largest dolls."

"I will gladly help you sew," Mrs. Holt said. "Alice has told me that the dolls are to be given away at Christmas: that is all I know about it," she added, smiling in a motherly, understanding way. She had a pretty, rather sad face and a very tender look in her blue eyes. It was a great grief to her to be parted from her husband, and there was another grief which lay further back in her heart.

Even in the few moments of their talking together, Ruth Warren had decided that Mrs. Holt was a very charming woman, and just the kind of a mother Ben and Alice might be expected to have.

Elsa and Betty had drawn their chairs very near to Alice and were telling her all that had happened

in school that morning, when Ben came in from having put the horse into the barn, and walked up to his mother's side with "What shall we do?"

"O, I know what to do," he exclaimed, answering his own question. "We will have a show."

"Goody!" cried Betty, hearing his last words.

Mrs. Holt entered at once into the plan. "Miss Warren and Alice and I will be audience. You can manage your show with Betty and Elsa to help, I think."

"But what about the dolls' dresses?" Elsa asked, eager as she was for the "show."

"Bless the dear child!" said Mrs. Holt, putting her arm around the slight, black-gowned figure. "Miss Warren and I will sew fast enough to do your share and Betty's." She gazed intently into Elsa's face as if she would like to question the child about something.

"O, thank you," Elsa said, gratefully. "Why, that picture is just like one my grandmother has in her room," she exclaimed, catching sight of an oil-painting of a large, gable-windowed house.

As Ruth Warren saw Mrs. Holt's face grow crimson and then suddenly very pale, some faint, puzzling resemblance flashed through her mind and was gone as quickly.

Before Mrs. Holt had any time to answer, Ben ran toward her and laid his hand coaxingly upon her shoulder: "Now, mother of mine, I have brought the 'show' things down from the garret, and the pink gauze curtain; and please can we use the red light?"

"Yes, my boy. What shows are you going to have?" Mrs. Holt's voice was not quite steady, but she had regained her composure.

"You will see in just a little while, mother of mine," said Ben, with the air of one who speaks to an over-eager child.

Then, while Mrs. Holt explained to Miss Ruth and Elsa that the pink cheese-cloth curtain was used to make the show-figures look more beautiful, and that the red light, which made them even more beautiful, was brought out only on great occasions like birthdays or holidays, Elsa forgot all about the oil-painting; and very soon after, Ben called her to join Betty and him in the parlour, which opened off the hall, at the foot of the stairs. "Turn your backs, please," cried Ben; "you mustn't see what is going to happen."

"Ben is such a manly little fellow," said Miss Ruth, rising to change her position.

Quick tears sprang into Mrs. Holt's blue eyes.

"He tries to take care of me," she replied, with a little tremble in her voice; "my dear little boy," she added, half under her breath. "He is a great help in the gardening we do, winter and summer, although I have a good man to take the principal care. But I am sorry to have the children away from their father. We hope it will not be very long before he can come back to us, or we go to him."

"Mr. Holt is a teacher, I believe," said Ruth Warren, who found herself growing much interested in the Holt family.

"Yes, out in Colorado; he had to go there for his health, and that is why we are here," was the reply, given with quiet dignity.

Ruth Warren liked Mrs. Holt all the better because she did not attempt to make any apology for keeping a market-garden, or to explain their poverty, which was evident from the shabby furniture and plain clothing.

"I wish they would begin," sighed Alice, who was feeling rather left out of things and who had all this time kept her eyes turned away from the stairs, where mysterious preparations were going on.

"You may turn 'round now," called out Ben,

starting the red light. So the audience faced expectantly toward the stage which was formed by the wide landing four steps up the stairway.

Ben, jerking back the pink curtain, announced in a deep, dramatic tone: "Priscilla, the Puritan Maiden."

Beside a real spinning-wheel sat Elsa with a white cap over her golden hair and a white kerchief across her shoulders, — a demure little Puritan maiden, her face very rosy under the red light.

The applause from the audience was hearty and prolonged. Alice clapped louder than any one else. But after the curtain was drawn forward, she slipped her hand into her mother's and said wistfully, "I do wish my foot was well so I could be in the shows."

"Think of the little Convalescent children, my darling," said Mrs. Holt in a low tone, replacing the afghan which Alice had restlessly pushed away. "Think how some of them keep still all the time."

A moment later Alice's face dimpled with smiles as Ben drew aside the curtain and said in his stage voice: "Little Red Riding-hood."

It was Betty in a short red cape and a tightly drawn red hood. With the red light falling upon

her round cheeks and her laughing eyes, she looked indeed like a little maid from the fields.

"Doesn't the Glad Girl make a splendid Red Riding-hood?" cried Ben, turning a somersault on the hearth-rug. "And wouldn't the wolf have a fine time eating her up!" he added, capering back to draw the curtain.

Red Riding-hood herself announced the next show, "George Washington," who was no other than Ben, standing on a large book covered with white cloth to represent a block of ice, and wearing a cock-hat and an old military coat which came down to his heels — a brave-faced Father of his Country.

"You forgot to say 'Crossing the Delaware,' Betty," exclaimed the show-figure, leaning forward on his very thick sword made out of the fire-tongs covered with brown paper.

"Of course they would know that," Betty replied; and the audience agreed that they would have known it without being told.

"Just one more," cried Ben, stepping from off the block of ice to help Betty draw the curtain. "This one's going to take a very long time to get ready, and you must guess the name of it. May I whisper to the Black Lace Lady, mother?"

Mrs. Holt nodded permission, and Ben whispered something into Miss Ruth's ear, to which she must have agreed, for he carried her heavy coat into the parlour, where Betty and Elsa were, and shut the door.

It took so long for them to arrange this last show that Mrs. Holt and Miss Ruth finished making the first of the dolls' dresses, and Mrs. Holt was sewing upon the second one for Alice, when Betty called "Ready!" and pulled back the curtain to disclose a marvellous sight.

There stood Elsa, behind a wall of sofa pillows, her hair floating down over the light blue silk scarf which covered her shoulders and her slender figure draped in a dark blue velvet table-cover, while on her shoulder perched a stuffed gray squirrel. On the step below the pillow-wall knelt Ben, wearing Miss Ruth's long coat with the gray fur lining side out, his head and arms covered with Betty's gray boa. This strange-looking figure was pulling with his teeth at a sofa pillow in the supposed wall, and repeating, in a muffled voice: "Keep a good heart! Keep a good heart!"

"Princess Katrina and the Gray Owl!" Alice cried out, the moment her eyes fell upon this group. "How lovely, how lovely!" she said over and over

again, clapping her hands. Mrs. Holt and Ruth Warren joined in the applause, laughing until the tears came into their eyes, for Ben was such a ridiculously funny figure, although so well made up.

Elsa kept still as long as she could; then the stuffed gray squirrel fell from her shoulder, and Ben, springing to catch it, knocked down the wall of pillows, and the show was over.

"How did you *ever* happen to think of it?" Alice asked, when the flushed and happy actors stood around the lounge, taking off their costumes.

"Elsa thought of it," cried Betty, who was holding the stuffed squirrel tenderly.

"Betty made me take the princess part, though I wanted her to," said Elsa.

"Because she has yellow hair, like the princess," put in Ben. "Betty dressed us, and didn't she do well? Your coat was just the thing," he added, turning as Miss Ruth rose to help him out of it. "My! it's hot."

"Did you know what it was, Mrs. Holt?" Elsa inquired, coming to Mrs. Holt's side.

"Yes, dear, for Alice has told the story to Ben and me, twice."

"Do your children tell you stories?" Elsa asked, with wide-open, surprised eyes.

"Sometimes, Elsa," Mrs. Holt replied. "I sit by the fire the last part of the afternoon, usually, and the children lie on pillows in front of the fire; and if I am too tired to tell them a story, they tell me one."

"And do they have shows often?" Elsa questioned eagerly. This was almost like a story-book, this account of the happy home-life.

"Yes; they keep a boxful of costumes and that pink curtain on purpose for shows. They get up all sorts of plays, too," Mrs. Holt went on to say, seeing the keen interest in Elsa's face. "Last summer they played snake until it got on my imagination so that I hardly dared step on the floor for fear of putting my foot on that snake."

"It wasn't really a snake, though," said Betty, who had turned to listen.

"No, only a make-believe one," Mrs. Holt replied laughingly; "but they made it seem real."

"But, mother of mine," said Ben very earnestly, "you know I only got Peggy to play that so as to teach her not to be afraid of snakes."

"Girls!" exclaimed Ruth Warren, "it is quarter of five o'clock, and snowing fast. We must begin

to get ready to go home." She realized that it would take considerable time.

"Mamma, dear, I wish Elsa and Betty could stay here all night," cried Alice. Betty had stayed before, once.

"They could perfectly well, Alice," replied Mrs. Holt cordially, "if Elsa's grandmother and Betty's mother were willing."

"Let's telephone and ask," suggested Ben.

"I think my mother will let me stay," Betty said quickly, standing on tip-toe in her excitement, "because it's Friday and no school to-morrow. May I telephone now?"

In a few moments Betty came back from the side-hall: "Yes, mother says I can stay, if Mrs. Holt is sure I won't be a bother. Aren't you going to telephone about staying?" she asked, turning to Elsa, who had been silent all this time, although her eyes showed how much she wanted to stay.

"I — I don't believe grandmother would let me," Elsa replied, making a brave effort to keep a steady face.

"Why don't you ask her for Elsa, mamma?" inquired Alice. "Do, mother of mine," urged Ben.

Mrs. Holt's face flushed, then grew pale, and a

look of pride came over it. "I cannot do that, children, much as I would like to have Elsa remain."

"I will ask Mrs. Danforth," Ruth Warren said quickly, going to the telephone. Presently she returned to the impatient group and said in a cheerful tone:

"Elsa's grandmother wants her to come home. She asks me to say to you, Elsa, that you will not be sorry you came."

But even this last part of the message could not keep Elsa from turning quickly away, toward the window, to hide her feelings.

"I will go and harness Jerry," said Ben, hurrying out of the room. The others talked very fast for a few moments.

"I wish you could stay all night, Miss Ruth," Alice said more hospitably than thoughtfully, when Miss Ruth was putting on her coat.

"There is no use in my thinking of it," Miss Ruth answered quickly: "my Aunt Virginia would never give her consent."

It was so funny to think of grown-up Miss Ruth having to mind that Elsa, feeling comforted, came away from the window and began to get ready for the drive home.

"I hope Alice's ankle will be well before the next meeting," said Miss Ruth, when they were at last ready to start.

"It will be quite well in a week, unless she is careless, or takes cold," Mrs. Holt replied. "I am sure she is most grateful to the Club, as I am, for your coming here."

Ben, who had driven Jerry up to the front door and come in to warm his hands, carelessly picked up a sofa pillow in passing, and shied it at Alice. "That's just to show Peggy that she must keep quiet, no matter what happens," he said in answer to his mother's reproving: "Why, Ben!"

Betty had sprung to Alice's defence, and for a moment she and Ben had a lively pulling contest over the pillow. Elsa looked on in surprise; not having any brothers or sisters, she was not used to that kind of fun and hardly knew what to make of it.

Suddenly Betty dropped her corner of the pillow. "Excuse me," she said to Mrs. Holt; "I forgot. Ben threw that pillow at Alice just the way Max throws one at me sometimes, and I have to defend myself."

"You will have a lively time to-night, Mrs.

Holt," Ruth Warren said, with a sober face and smiling eyes.

"Children must be children," Mrs. Holt replied with an answering smile. "It is better for Alice to have things a little lively than to lie here and feel lonely. But I think that she and Betty will be studying over to-day's lessons after supper."

"O, mamma! with my lame ankle!" protested Alice. And Betty's face fell a little.

"Yes, dear, you must study awhile; it will not hurt your ankle. You say that Betty is always ahead of you in your classes, so she can be the teacher." Mrs. Holt said this partly to cheer Betty and partly so that Elsa would not go away thinking that the visit she was missing would be all pleasure.

"We haven't any more dolls' dresses to make, Miss Ruth," Alice said, handing to her a pile of neatly folded little light-coloured garments. "What shall we do next?"

"I will have something ready at the next meeting, Alice, — something that perhaps Ben can help upon," replied Ruth Warren, kissing Alice goodbye, and thinking that it would be hard to find two more lovable and companionable children than

Alice and Ben, or a happier, more satisfying home life than theirs.

"Just think, only two weeks more of school," cried Betty. "Maybe the Club can meet twice a week in vacation?" Betty looked at Miss Ruth questioningly.

"O, I wish it could!" Alice clasped her chubby hands together beseechingly.

Ruth Warren shook her head, but with that kind look in her eyes which always made any refusal seem less hard. "Once a week is enough for us really to enjoy it," she said, "don't you think so, Betty dear?"

"I suppose so," Betty admitted with her usual candour; "only I don't ever have half so good a time anywhere else."

"Come, Elsa, we must start," Miss Ruth said, adding, as she shook hands with Mrs. Holt: "I should like to call upon you some day soon."

"I should be delighted to have you call," replied Mrs. Holt, warmly. "I have made only a few acquaintances in Berkeley during the year I have lived here. Betty's mother has been very kind about coming to see me. Children often bring together people who might not otherwise meet," she

added, smoothing back Betty's rumpled hair in a gentle, motherly fashion.

"We will show you the market-garden when you come again," Ben said with an air of pride. "It's a very interesting place."

"Yes, you might enjoy that, Miss Warren," said Mrs. Holt with a gentle dignity. "We have a large winter-garden, back of the house, and this year, in addition to vegetables, we are raising hyacinths and such things, and later, we are going to try raising mushrooms."

"That sounds most delightful," said Miss Ruth heartily; "I am sure I shall enjoy seeing it all."

"Perhaps you would like to come, also," Mrs. Holt said, rather timidly it seemed, turning to Elsa.

"O, yes, I should," cried Elsa eagerly. "I think you are very kind to little girls, and," she added shyly, trying to be very polite, "you — you have beautiful flowers."

"Children and flowers — I've never had enough of them yet," exclaimed Mrs. Holt, stooping suddenly to kiss Elsa's upturned face.

It was snowing hard. Ben tucked Miss Ruth and Elsa into the back seat and then mounted to the front seat. Mrs. Holt, Alice, and Betty waved good-bye from the front windows, Miss Ruth and

Elsa waved back as long as they could see the house; and the gay, pleasant meeting was over.

Elsa was always so happy in being with Miss Ruth that once the pang of leaving had vanished, she settled down with a contented sigh. It was a beautiful time to be out-of-doors. Now that the snow was falling in thick soft flakes, the chill had gone out of the air. The tall evergreen trees drooped under their heavy white cloaks. In the west there was a faint rosy tinge from the light of the setting sun. Now and then a loud-cawing crow flew overhead, and once, by the roadside, they saw a hungry blue-jay flirt the snow off from a tall brown weed and begin to pick out and eat the seeds.

The three talked awhile of the sights and sounds around them. Then Ben turned his entire attention to Jerry, who needed constant urging for this journey away from home, at the end of the day.

"I asked Miss Hartwell a day or two ago about the nurse Bettina; and her name is Bettina March," Miss Ruth said, unexpectedly.

"O my Bettina!" cried Elsa, with a little gasp. "And is she coming back?"

"Possibly," Miss Ruth replied. "She was at the Convalescent Home only about six weeks, and

went away because she was not very well; but if she is better, she is coming back about Christmas time."

"Then I shall see her, — grandmother will surely let me see her; but it won't be for three whole weeks!" The little thrill of disappointment in Elsa's voice told Ruth Warren better than words could have told, how dearly Elsa loved her old nurse.

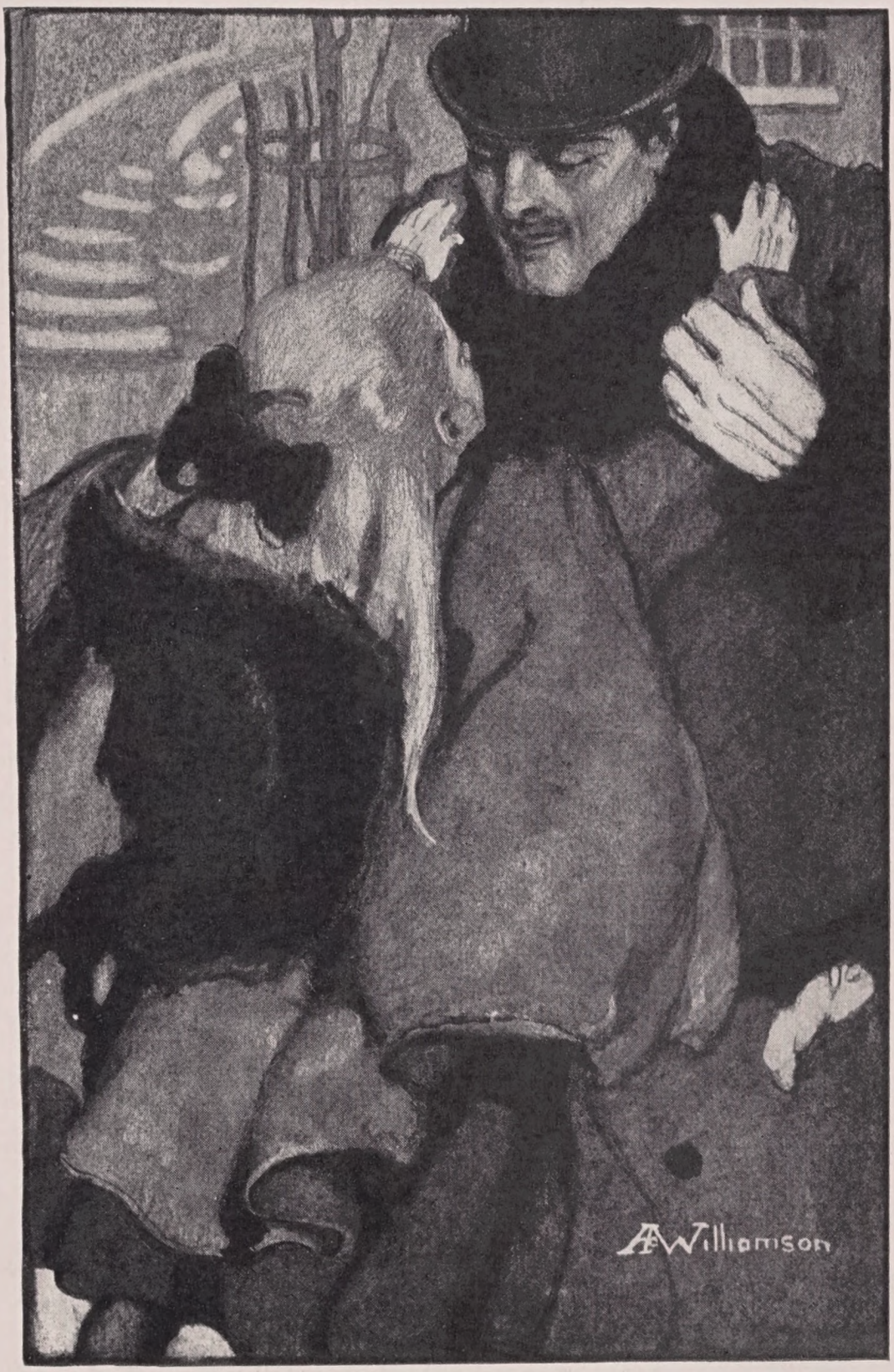
"Of course she may not come back at all, Elsa," Ruth Warren felt obliged to say.

To this Elsa made no reply; but she asked, in a rather choked voice: "Did you find out where Bettina is now?"

"No, Elsa," Miss Ruth answered gently. She felt very sorry for Elsa's disappointment, but she did not wish in any way to interfere with Mrs. Danforth's plan for the child.

Ben, perched upon the front seat, was beginning to look as if he had on a white fur coat. They were just driving along Washington Avenue, approaching the Warren house, when Elsa exclaimed rapturously: "Uncle Ned! O, there is my Uncle Ned!"

A tall, broad-shouldered man, who was strolling by in leisurely fashion, looked up and then stepped



"SOOTHING THE CHILD WHO CLUNG TO HIM SO PASSIONATELY."

quickly toward the sleigh as Ben stopped his horse in front of the Warrens' house. Elsa was out in a flash, and the tall man was bending over, soothing the child who clung to him so passionately.

"Uncle Ned! When did you come?" Elsa asked between laughter and tears.

"Less than an hour ago. I reached the house only a few moments before your grandmother was telephoning about you."

"I am so glad, now, that I came home," cried the child, still clinging to him as if she could hardly believe her happiness in really having him here.

Ben had meanwhile jumped out and was gallantly helping Miss Ruth from the sleigh. Elsa was far too excited to think of introductions.

"This is your friend, Miss Ruth, Elsa?" asked the tall uncle, taking off his hat.

"Yes — excuse me — this is Miss Ruth, our Club — our Christmas Makers' Club —" cried Elsa, telling the name before she thought.

"Miss Ruth looks more like a tall young lady than a Club, — even a Christmas Makers' Club," said Elsa's uncle gravely.

"Uncle Ned! I mean that she runs the Club," cried Elsa in half distressed, half laughing tone.

"Yes, I run the Club," said Ruth Warren

quickly. The arc-light overhead shone brightly. The snow was on her long eyelashes and her face was flushed with the fresh air.

"I am grateful to you if my little niece has caught her red cheeks from the running," was the instant reply.

"Here is another member of the Club," Ruth Warren said, turning to Ben, "Ben Holt, the only boy in the Club."

"Another red-cheeked member! I quite approve of this Club," said the tall uncle, who had dark gray eyes, somewhat like Elsa's. "Does the Club drive you, or do you drive the Club, sir?" he asked, in his quick way of speaking.

"Sometimes one, sometimes the other, sir," Ben replied merrily. "I am the only one that takes them driving, though, because I have such a safe, steady horse."

"He looks like a good safe horse, Ben," said Elsa's uncle, gravely and politely.

Ben climbed back into the sleigh and began turning Jerry. "Good-bye! Perhaps you'll come to the Club sometimes, as long as you are Elsa's uncle," he called out in friendly fashion; "it meets Friday afternoons. Good-bye, Black Lace Lady! Good-bye, Elsa!"

"Thank you," the tall uncle called out, for Jerry, headed toward home, started off in a hurry; "I am afraid I shall not be here until another meeting."

The boy and the angular horse vanished amid the thick-falling snow.

"How long are you going to stay, Uncle Ned?" asked Elsa, in a most anxious voice.

"Only over night, Sweetheart," he answered quickly, "but we mustn't let that spoil our visit. What is the name of this wonderful Club?"

"Didn't you hear me say it?" Elsa asked.

But Uncle Ned had forgotten.

"It's a secret," said Elsa; "you can't know it unless you belong."

"It is a very exclusive Club, you see, Mr. Danforth," said Miss Ruth, turning toward the walk which led from the pavement to her home.

"That makes me want to join all the more," came the laughing answer.

"I can tell you just this much, Uncle Ned," cried Elsa, unfastening Miss Ruth's golf-cape, "we are making things for Christmas."

"And does Miss Ruth live here in the house next to your grandmother's?" asked the tall uncle, taking the cape from Elsa.

"Yes; she lives all alone with her aunt, just the way I live all alone with grandmother," Elsa said, a little sadly.

"You ought to be very good friends," said the uncle, soberly, for he had noticed the change in Elsa's tone.

"We are," replied Ruth Warren convincingly.

"Yes, we are," echoed Elsa in a happy voice now.

"Let me go ahead on your path and make some tracks for you, the snow is so deep," suggested Mr. Danforth, quickly stepping forward. So Ruth Warren followed in his footsteps, and Elsa brought up in the rear.

At the door, Elsa's uncle put out his hand and said in a grateful voice: "My little niece has written me about you, Miss Warren, and I want to thank you for all that you are doing to make her happy."

"Elsa and her friends give me a great deal of pleasure," said Miss Ruth in turn, with an unmistakable ring of sincerity in her voice.

"Will the Club meet here next Friday?" asked Elsa eagerly.

"Yes, next Friday; and we shall have something new to work upon," Miss Ruth replied.

"Will you give Miss Ruth her cape, Uncle Ned?" asked Elsa. "She let me take it for our sleigh-ride. I wonder what the new thing is going to be," she added, with lively interest.

But Miss Ruth only smiled and said: "Wait and see!"

As Elsa's Uncle Ned took off his hat in farewell, Ruth Warren saw that his hair was quite gray and that his face had the careworn look of a very busy man. Elsa herself seemed like another girl since her uncle had come.

Miss Virginia Warren had left the shade up, at her front window, and had seen Ruth's meeting with the tall man whom Elsa Danforth had greeted so affectionately.

"There, Ruth!" said Miss Virginia when her niece came into her room; "I was sure something would happen! What could that young gentleman have thought of your being in that dreadful old sleigh?"

"It was Elsa's uncle, and he is not so very young, Aunt Virginia; I am sure he is forty, and his hair is gray," replied Ruth Warren. "I don't believe he was thinking of me at all; he seemed so rejoiced that Elsa's cheeks were red instead of

white that I don't believe he thought about anything or anybody else."

But Miss Virginia was not to be pacified: "You do such strange things, Ruth, for a young woman of your social position, and thirty years old, too," she sighed; "going off in that pung, was it, you called it? with a lot of children, and to a market-gardener's home."

Ruth Warren, leaving the first part of her aunt's remark without answer, made haste to say: "Mrs. Holt is in every sense a lady, and I shall call upon her at the very first opportunity."

Miss Virginia dropped the subject, and said in a more kindly tone: "I really hope the Club will come here next week; I begin to think, as Sarah does, that it is rather pleasant to hear their young voices in this quiet old house. We missed them this afternoon."

In this change of mind on the part of Miss Virginia, Ruth Warren recognized Sarah Judd's influence; for behind an iron exterior, this trusty old serving-woman had a heart of gold.

CHAPTER V

A LITTLE OLD LADY'S DOLL

Something the heart must have to cherish.
— Henry W. Longfellow.

THE next Monday afternoon Elsa and Alice went home from school with Betty to talk over a plan which Elsa had said, with a very mysterious air, that she wanted to tell them about. Finding that the baby was not in the nursery, Betty took her friends to this delightful room, with the flowering geraniums and the little strawberry-birds and the row of dolls, the gay pillows of the window-seat, and the Kate Greenaway paper.

"I should think you would stay here all the time, Betty," exclaimed Elsa, curling herself into a little heap on the rug, and leaning back against the bed; her eyes began roaming around the "picture-book room," as she called it to herself.

"I do stay here half of the time, — all night," Betty answered quickly. "That's half the time when you have to go to bed at eight o'clock! Now

tell us about your secret." Betty sat down near the door, to guard the approach, and Alice drew a small rocking-chair close to the shelf of plants, so that she could watch the lively little strawberry-birds.

"It's this," said Elsa; "when my Uncle Ned was here, last Friday, he asked me ever and ever so much about the Club, and I told him about our dressing dolls for the Convalescent Home children, and about how much they needed money; and he thought it would be nice if we could earn some money, — no matter if it was just a little, — and surprise Miss Ruth, and have it to give to the Convalescent Home with the dolls on Christmas Day." Elsa's eyes were shining with interest.

"I know how I can earn some," cried Betty. "When I especially want to earn money, mother gives me five cents a day for emptying waste-baskets; and I will ask father to let me black his boots. How many days are there before Christmas, — let me see, just fourteen, and the waste-baskets would give me seventy cents, surely. What are you going to do, Elsa, to earn money?"

"Uncle Ned said he would give me fifty cents a week if I would write a four-page letter to him twice a week."

"That will be a dollar," said Betty, a little envi-

ous at Elsa's being able to earn more than she. "What will you do, Alice?"

"Mamma sometimes pays me for washing the dishes. If I do them twice a day, she will give me five cents, I think, each day."

"That will be seventy cents more," Betty said encouragingly, "and two dollars and forty cents in all."

"And I'm sure Ben can earn some, shovelling snow and running errands," cried Alice eagerly.

"I wish grandmother would let me wash dishes or black boots," sighed Elsa. "Work hurts people's hands, she says."

"But we will have at least three dollars, if Ben earns some, too," Betty said quickly, thinking how tiresome it must be to have to be careful all the time about keeping one's hands soft and white. "Won't Miss Ruth be surprised, though!" she added joyfully.

Elsa clasped her slender little hands around her knees: "I know a lovely surprise the Club is going to have;" her violet-gray eyes danced with pleasure.

"O, what is it?" cried both the other girls.

"I mustn't tell; Uncle Ned told me not to. You see, he asked me what I wanted most for Christ-

mas, and at first I said some little strawberry-birds like Betty's, and then we talked it over, and he said he couldn't get them very well in cold weather, and perhaps grandmother wouldn't like them, so we decided on something even nicer, — something the whole Club will like."

"I think it's mean to tell just a little bit, and not tell the rest," declared Betty.

"But I should think you'd like to know you are going to have something, anyway," said peace-maker Alice. "Will Miss Ruth like it, too?"

"I think so; I am sure she will," Elsa answered, joyfully.

Seeing the cloud on Betty's face, Alice spoke up quickly: "Don't you think we ought to decide to-day on something to give Miss Ruth for Christmas, — maybe something from all of us?"

"Yes, I've been thinking about that," exclaimed Betty, diverted by the suggestion. "Mother said she would help us decide." And Betty ran out into the hall, calling "Mother! Mother, dear!"

Presently Mrs. White came into the nursery. Being an affectionate and thoughtful woman, she felt that it was wise not in any way to discourage the generous impulses of the little girls. "How will this plan suit you?" she asked, after they had

talked the matter over for a few moments: "Each one of you bring to me the amount of money she can perfectly well afford to give for a present, and no one shall know how much the others give; then all of you go with me some day after vacation begins, and we will choose the present."

This plan suited the girls perfectly.

"And it makes another surprise," cried Elsa in great delight. "We have so many now that I am almost getting them mixed up."

Mrs. White's motherly heart was rejoiced at Elsa's brighter, happier face. "The Club and the being with other children are doing her a world of good," she said to herself wisely.

At noon on Friday, Betty White ran in to see Miss Ruth, solely for the purpose of talking about the Club meeting. "Elsa and I were saying at recess this morning," she began breathlessly, "that we thought you had forgotten all about the story of the old lady's doll that you were going to tell us. Will you tell it this afternoon? You can be thinking it up."

To this Miss Ruth agreed.

Betty had in one hand a fancy-striped paper bag, full of chocolate candy. She held it toward Miss

Ruth: "Take some, please. O, take more than one piece! Mother had a birthday yesterday and she gave each of us children two dollars. She hid the money in different places 'round the house, and we had to hunt for it; it was such fun.

"I like mother's birthdays, 'cause she always gives us something," Betty rattled on, in her usual lively fashion. "Last year she baked some new silver dollars into a cottage pudding: it looked so heavy that none of us would take any at first, except Max, but when he bit into a dollar and showed it to us, we all took some in a hurry.

"Have some more candy, please," urged Betty, generously, holding forth the striped bag again. "I bought a lot, — twenty-five cents' worth out of my two dollars, — so I could have some candy to eat in school. I never get found out. Don't ever tell, will you?"

"Do I ever tell?" asked Miss Ruth.

"No," Betty said, with an approving nod, "I don't believe you ever do."

"Don't you think it would be more honourable, however, Betty, since candy-eating is not allowed in school, for you not to take the candy there?" Ruth Warren asked, looking intently into Betty's face.

Betty lowered her eyes, but did not make any answer.

"Leave the candy here," suggested Ruth Warren, "and have it for the Club meeting."

"All — right, I will," came the rather reluctant but courageous consent.

"Well, it's 'most school-time and I must go," cried Betty in her wonted happy manner, a half-moment later. "Thank you for keeping the candy." She took a last piece by way of reward to herself, and hurried off to school.

There was no Alice with Betty and Elsa when they arrived, soon after three o'clock. "She wasn't at school this morning, but Ben has gone home to see if she can come," Betty explained at once.

"Mrs. Holt has just now telephoned me," Ruth Warren said, "and she tells me that Alice has a feverish cold, so she cannot come to the Club."

"We might go out there," Betty suggested.

"But we are not invited," Ruth Warren replied merrily. "If Alice has a feverish cold, naturally enough her mother would not invite us there."

"It is too bad," cried Elsa. "Alice will be so disappointed." Both she and Betty looked quite downcast, for they were very fond of Alice.

"Can we have the story just the same, or shall we wait?" Betty inquired anxiously.

"We will have the story," replied Miss Ruth, "because I shall go out to see Alice to-morrow, and if she would like, I will tell it to her there."

"Please begin now, then," urged Betty.

"But first I want to show you what I have for the Club to work upon," said Miss Ruth, beginning to undo the wrappings of a large, flat pasteboard box which stood upon the table.

"O, goody!" cried Betty, who had been eying the box with lively curiosity.

"Paper dolls!" exclaimed Elsa, clasping her hands in rapturous delight, as the box-cover came off.

"What beauties!" Betty said, dancing a quick-step in her excitement.

There were twelve sets of dolls, all fully dressed, and with extra costumes, ready to be painted.

"All those dresses, — all the hats, too, to be painted," said Elsa, in great glee.

"What fun! What fun!" cried Betty, whirling around like a lively top, while Miss Ruth took from the box a large tin case of water-colour paints and several brushes, and placed them upon some sheets

of blotting-paper which already covered the polished mahogany table.

Betty had just been out to the kitchen for some water, — at Miss Ruth's suggestion and to grim-faced Sarah's great delight, — and she was filling the paint saucers when she glanced up at the sound of loud sleigh-bells and cried out: "Why! there is Alice!"

"It can't be Alice!" said Elsa, following Betty to the window.

"It's the Holts' hired man, grinning from ear to ear, and Alice with him," insisted Betty. "She has just jumped out of the sleigh."

The bell rang, and in a surprisingly short time Sarah appeared at the library door, trying hard not to burst out laughing; for behind her came Ben, very red in the face, dressed in a brown sailor suit of Alice's, and looking so sheepish and so comical that Miss Ruth joined in the general laugh, and Sarah went off chuckling, with her white apron up to her face.

"Peggy felt so bad because she couldn't come that I put on one of her old dresses over my own clothes, just for fun, to make her laugh," said Ben, hanging his head, but marching bravely into the room.

"I shouldn't think you'd want to wear girls' clothes and come to a girls' Club," said Betty teasingly.

"Girls are all right, 'most of the time," Ben answered. "They're too afraid of their clothes to be as nice as boys, all the time. This is awful tight; mother said she knew something would happen to it;" he was still very red in the face.

Something had happened already, for one of the sleeves had partly ripped from the blouse waist. Noticing this, Ruth Warren noticed also a tumultuous movement under the blouse, suggestive of sobs. But Ben's smiling, ruddy face showed no signs of grief. A half moment later, a tiny, furry head with bright bead-like eyes, looked out above the blouse collar.

In her usual tone Miss Ruth said: "I see you have brought one of your pets with you, Ben."

Ben made a quick movement, but not quick enough to prevent a gray squirrel from springing out of his attempted grasp, upon the window-sill.

Elsa jumped, and Betty cried: "Ben Holt! How mean of you! Poor little squirrel!"

The squirrel's heart was thumping wildly under the soft fur of his chest, and his breath came in

quick gasps as he turned his head rapidly from side to side, searching a chance to escape.

"Is he your tame squirrel, Ben?" Ruth Warren inquired.

"Not exactly; you see we've been feeding him from the dining-room window, so he's quite tame," explained Ben, "and — and I caught him on the wood-pile, with some nuts, and brought him along to see if the girls would be frightened."

"O, that is it," was all Ruth Warren said, but Ben's face grew redder than ever.

Making a sudden leap, the squirrel landed on top of the tall bookcase. From here he gave another leap to the top of a window, and began scolding loudly.

"I will bring some walnuts, Ben, so that you can capture this frightened little creature and take him home," Miss Ruth said, going to the pantry.

"Now aren't you sorry, Ben?" teased Betty.

The relish of the joke was indeed gone for Ben, but he faced the music bravely, for, though often heedless, he was no coward. When Miss Ruth came back with the walnuts, he asked the girls to keep quiet, and in a few moments coaxed Mr. Squirrel down from the window-top to the mantel,

where he sat with his bushy tail curled up over his back, turning a nut-meat round and round in his paws as he ate it, listening and watching intently.

It was hard for Betty and Elsa to keep from laughing, and even Miss Ruth had difficulty in keeping her face sober, for Ben in his sister's short-skirted dress, which hardly came to his knees, — leaving an extra long pair of thin legs which ended in good-sized feet, — was an exceedingly droll sight. A giggle from Betty at the critical moment sent the squirrel flying to the curtain-top again; but greedy hunger conquered fear, and growing venturesome again, the squirrel came by cautious degrees down to the window-sill. While he sat there, filling his cheek pouches with the cracked walnuts, Ben, who had been close at hand all the while, deftly captured him and tucked him away securely into the blouse waist.

"Now, if one of you girls will unfasten this old dress skirt, I'll drop it off," Ben said meekly, after struggling to unbutton the skirt with one hand while holding the squirrel fast with the other. "I can't go through the streets with a skirt on," he added, shamefacedly.

Miss Ruth unfastened the waist-band buttons, the skirt dropped to the floor, and Ben stood there

in the middle of the room, looking even funnier than ever in his dark blue knickerbockers and the brown blouse waist. Miss Ruth mercifully and quickly helped him into the old blue reefer jacket, which was so tight now that he could not button it at all.

"I should be glad to have you come back to the Club meeting, after you have taken the squirrel home, Ben," Miss Ruth said, with the double purpose of making sure that the squirrel reached his headquarters and of giving Ben a share in the meeting if he really wanted to come back. "Will you ask Alice if she would like some of the paper dolls to paint, and if she would, you could take them to her," she added.

"Yes, I will come back," Ben answered, with a brightening face. "I'd like to — anyway — and Peggy would be disappointed not to know all about the meeting."

"I am going to tell the Club a story I promised them. It is only about a little old lady's doll; but if you would like to hear it, I will wait till you come."

"Yes, ma'am, I should like to hear it, thank you," replied Ben most humbly.

"Alice said you like dolls, Ben," cried Betty mischievously.

"I don't care, — I do like dolls sometimes. I ducked a boy into the frog-pond once — " began Ben; but he stopped and burst out laughing, for Miss Ruth had given him a queer look, and now she was saying: "It seems to me we have heard about that before, Ben."

"Hurry, Ben," exclaimed Elsa, impatient for the story. "Hurry home and hurry back again."

"Perhaps I can find our hired man on the road with Jerry," called out Ben, as he left the room, "and then I'd go flying home and back quicker than a flash."

"Or a squirrel," added Miss Ruth. "Be careful of the squirrel, Ben."

Both Elsa and Betty wanted some advice about the colours of paints to use first, so the time did not seem very long to them before Ben returned, — a most penitent-faced boy now, and in his own clothes.

Ben walked straight up to Miss Ruth, made his best bow, and said in a manly way, though very fast: "Mother says I must beg your pardon for bringing the squirrel. I am sorry I did it."

"I think you frightened the squirrel more than

you did the girls, Ben," Miss Ruth replied, feeling that the boy had already done sufficient penance for his attempted fun.

Ben drew a long breath of relief. "I had a ride both ways," he said, quite cheerfully. "May I paint, too?" he inquired, turning to look at the tempting array upon the table, and also at the plateful of thin sandwiches which Miss Ruth had wisely provided to go with Betty's candy.

"Yes, indeed," Miss Ruth answered. "How would you like to paint the shoes on the dolls? Take some sandwiches, children."

"I will black their boots for them," cried Ben merrily, as he helped himself to a chicken sandwich and a paint-brush.

"Betty brought the candy," said Miss Ruth, for Ben, somehow, was ready for a piece in a flash. Then Betty bravely made the explanation.

"Peggy says she will do all the painting you want her to. She can't hardly wait for it." Ben suddenly remembered the message.

"We can't hardly wait for that story! Please, *please,* begin!" entreated Betty.

This is a true story, children, — said Ruth Warren, going toward the hearth, where a bright wood

fire burned steadily, and wheeling a deep, comfortable chair half around so that she might watch the children at their work: — The winter that I was eleven years old, my father had to go to California. My mother went with him, and as it would have been a rather long, hard journey for a child, they left me with my grandmother, who lived in a roomy, old-fashioned house just on the border of a large town. I was not very well that winter, and the doctor had said I must not go to school, but must be out-of-doors all that I could. I remember this half made up to me for having my father and mother go away — or I tried to think it did.

About three minutes' walk from my grandmother's, Miss Phoebe Dean, a little old lady who had been a school-teacher in her younger days, lived all alone in a snug, small story-and-a-half house. Miss Dean owned the house, but she was rather poor and not very strong. Grandmother used to send broths and jellies and things of that kind to her, every few days, and as I had no school lessons to take my time, grandmother generally sent the things by me.

Miss Dean was very friendly. She had all sorts of quaint, interesting curiosities in her house, for

her father had been around the world several times as captain of his own ship and had brought home many treasures; sometimes she would open an old carved chest and show me wonderful pictures and beautiful embroideries. Before long, she and I were such good friends that I went to see her almost every day, whether or not grandmother had anything to send.

The bedroom which I slept in at my grandmother's had a dormer window facing toward Miss Dean's house; and Miss Dean told me that she used to watch for my light every night at my bedtime. Grandmother had made Miss Dean promise that if she ever was ill at night, and wanted help, she would put two candles side by side in her front window. One night, after grandmother had put out my light and tucked me into bed, I looked toward Miss Dean's house, thinking that she was thinking about me; and I felt sure that I saw two candles in her front window. There were a few flakes of snow falling, and the lights looked rather dim, but I was sure they were there, and meant that Miss Dean was ill.

I called down to grandmother. She came upstairs to look, and then we both looked, but now

neither one of us could see any light. Grandmother said: "You imagined you saw the two candles, Ruth."

"No, grandmother," I insisted. "I am sure I saw them."

Grandmother laughed and called me a foolish little girl; but, to comfort me, said she would sit near the window down-stairs and look out every now and then toward Miss Dean's house. I kept my eyes on her window, by propping myself up in bed, with the pillows, until by and by I grew too sleepy to keep my eyes open, — especially as I did not see the candles again.

The next morning there was deep snow over everything. And because grandmother's house was on the border of the town, the streets were not cleared of snow until noonday. I kept thinking and talking about Miss Dean so much that about eleven o'clock grandmother said: "Put on your rubber boots, Ruth, and go over to see her, if you want to."

In about a minute I had on those rubber boots and my thick red coat, and was wading in the snow, quite to my knees, toward the little white house. It took me so long that two or three times I almost gave it up, because I was used to running

over in such a short time. But I kept on, and finally came to Miss Dean's green-and-white gate. There were no foot-tracks in the front yard, and the snow was so deep that I could hardly find the door-steps. When I did find them, I began pounding on the front door — Miss Dean did not have any door-bell — and very soon I saw her all bundled up in a shawl, looking out of the window to see who it was, before she unlocked the door.

Poor little old lady! She led me into the sitting-room, where she slept in the winter. "I shall have to go back to bed, dear," she said in her sweet way; "I have had a dreadful pain in my head ever since yesterday afternoon."

"Then you did put the two candles at the window last night?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, dear, for a little while," she said in a weak voice as she sank back against her pillows. "But when I saw that it was snowing, I took the candles away so as not to disturb your grandmother, for I thought the hired man and his wife might be gone down town, and she would have no one to send over."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I asked, for she had closed her eyes as if she were suffering. Half-frightened by her white face, I looked

away from the bed; and there in a little rocking-chair what did I see but a black-eyed doll, dressed in a long, clean white flannel nightgown and with a red shawl pinned around her.

"You might get some hot water from the tea-kettle on the kitchen stove," said Miss Dean, without opening her eyes, "and put a teaspoonful of peppermint essence out of that bottle on the table into a half glass of water. That might make me feel better."

I hurried out to the kitchen and brought back the hot mixture. Miss Dean took it all, then settled down again among the pillows; but she did not look so pale now. "I shall soon feel better," she said in her pretty, patient way.

So I waited, seating myself opposite that doll. It had a china head with such black hair, big black eyes and a round face, very white except the bright red cheeks and lips. It was a pretty, lovable doll, and I knew it must be a very old one.

"You are looking at my doll, Ruth," Miss Dean said suddenly; and turning, I found her eyes fixed upon my face.

"Is it your doll?" I cried.

"Yes," she said softly. She had large brown

"'WHAT DID I SEE BUT A BLACK-EYED DOLL.'"

eyes and a delicate face; her eyes seemed larger than ever now, because her face was so white.

"It is my doll," Miss Dean repeated. "Would you like to hold her?"

I had been longing to take that quaint, white-nightgowned doll into my arms. So I jumped up quickly and brought her back with me to the chair by the bed. Probably my face showed how I loved that old china doll on the spot. Anyway, after Miss Dean had watched me holding it a little while, she said: "That peppermint makes my head feel better. I will tell you about the doll."

"What is her name?" I asked.

"Susie," Miss Dean said, "and I have had her ever since I was five years old. The way I happen to keep her out now is this: You see, when I was younger, I used to teach children, year after year, different ones, of course. I used to think that maybe if I married and had a little daughter of my own, I would name her Susie, — my mother's name was Susan. But I grew older, and I didn't marry, and then, after a time, I had to give up school-teaching. My father and my mother had died, and I missed the children more and more.

"One day when it was very stormy and I was

dreadfully, desperately lonely, without a human being around, I went to the old trunk under the eaves, where I had put my dolls away when I was fourteen years old, and I took Susie out for just that day. And having that doll with me made me feel so much happier that, afterward, every once in awhile, when I grew lonely, I would take her out again. I made some new dresses and night-gowns for her, because it didn't seem quite fair not to treat her well when she gave me so much pleasure.

"Then, two or three years ago," — Miss Dean went on; and her large brown eyes began to grow very bright now, — "I put Susie into that little rocking-chair one snowy night when I went to bed; and it was so pleasant to wake up in the morning and find her there that I began to have her out every night. By day I always put her into the bureau drawer, because I thought if people saw her, they wouldn't understand. I should have put her away this morning when you came, only I was suffering so, I forgot her."

"But I understand," I said very quickly. "I am sure that if I lived alone, I should do just the same."

"So should I. Wasn't Miss Dean dear?" said Elsa, pushing back her cloudy golden hair as Miss Ruth stopped a moment to put a bit of fallen wood again into the fire.

"Why didn't she have more than one doll?" Betty asked, thoughtfully, splashing her brush into the water.

"Because one is enough," said Elsa instantly.

"Everybody likes one best," explained Ben, with the wisdom of ten and a half years.

After Miss Dean had told me about Susie, — continued Ruth Warren, leaning comfortably back into her chair again, — she asked me if I would like to see Susie's dresses. I said yes, of course, and she told me to open the lower drawer of the bureau. Such a quantity of pretty things as I found! I dressed and undressed Susie to my heart's content, putting on first a plaid silk gown, then a checked blue-and-white gingham and a funny little Red Riding-hood suit; and finally I put Susie back into her white nightgown, for I felt that Miss Dean would probably rather choose her dress for the day. And very soon I said I must go.

"Can't you stop and have a little bit of dinner — a kind of lunch — with me?" Miss Dean asked. "If you will put some biscuits into the oven to warm, and make some tea, I will dress myself, and we can have that with some cold ham and jelly."

I said I could stay, — for I knew grandmother wouldn't mind. So Miss Dean told me where the biscuit and tea were, and by the time I had them ready, she came out into the kitchen, dressed in a gray flannel wrapper with light blue trimmings. She made me think of a doll, she was so small and so dainty; — she was one of the daintiest people I have ever known, with white, beautifully shaped hands and soft, silky hair —

"She makes me think of Elsa," said Betty, with a little sigh, half of envy, half of appreciation.

"Don't interrupt, *please,* Betty," Elsa entreated, unmindful of what Betty had said.

Everything about Miss Dean's house was as dainty as Miss Dean herself — resumed the story-teller; — and everything in the house seemed small, like herself, — tables, chairs, lamps, vases, kitchen stove, even the dishes we ate out of. We had a good luncheon, I remember, and Miss Dean kept

me interested, as she always did, with stories of what had happened long ago. After we finished eating, she leaned her head back against her chair in a tired way — she sat at the table in a little rocking-chair — and she said in a wistful voice: "I have been thinking about my poor hens. Not a bit of corn or water have they had since yesterday, and I don't dare go out to feed them because my head is so dizzy that I am afraid of falling."

"O, let me feed them," I begged instantly.

"But they will be afraid of you," she said; "they are used to seeing my clothes."

"I can dress up in your clothes," I said. "O, do let me, please!"

Miss Dean liked a little fun, and she did want her hens fed. So she showed me where she kept her "chicken clothes" — as she called them, — a short brown skirt and a square plaid shawl that she wore over her head and shoulders. The skirt was long for me and the shawl made my head dreadfully hot. But we both laughed over it, and Miss Dean said she was glad to know how she looked. Then she told me not to flop my arms around, because that would frighten the hens. So, with a pail of water and two quarts of corn, I made my way to the hen-house, which was just beyond a lit-

tle shed. By the time I arrived, I had forgotten not to flop my arms, and the hens grew rather excited and lively, but they were too hungry and thirsty to care much who fed them. After that, I hunted around and found over a dozen white eggs, some of them quite warm, I remember. I tripped upon the brown skirt, going back, and let one egg fall out of the corn measure.

"The dolls' shoes are all blacked," exclaimed Ben, rising suddenly and stretching himself, boy-fashion. "May I take a sofa-pillow and lie down in front of the fire?" he asked, coming toward Miss Ruth.

"Make yourself comfortable, Ben," she answered readily; which Ben accordingly did.

"Excuse my interrupting," he said, in a low tone; "and please go on."

Miss Dean told me that breaking the egg did not matter, — that she often broke more than one, though I knew she said this just to make me feel better. "I have brought something out for you," she said, after I had taken off the brown skirt and the stifling plaid shawl, and she was counting the eggs. I saw on the kitchen table a black-and-gold

lacquered box, neither large nor small. It looked so interesting that I wanted to open it at once, but Miss Dean began talking about the hens.

I happened to see by the kitchen clock that it was almost three o'clock, and I knew that I ought to be going, for, though I sometimes stayed to lunch with Miss Dean, grandmother always said for me to come home immediately.

You may imagine how much I wanted to see what was in that beautiful lacquered box; but I said that I must go home. I hurried into the bedroom for my coat and Miss Dean followed me. I saw that she had dressed Susie in the blue and white gingham frock while I had been out feeding the hens.

"I will come over to-morrow," I said, as Miss Dean helped me on with my coat. She noticed me looking at Susie, — although I was not thinking of the doll just then.

"Do you mind, dear, not telling any one about Susie?" Miss Dean asked in a timid voice.

"I will not tell anybody at all," I remember I said, slowly, as I went, slowly also, out of the front door, hoping that Miss Dean would call me back to give me that box.

"Have you light enough for your painting,

girls?" Miss Ruth stopped to ask. The daylight had suddenly begun to disappear.

"Let's stop now; I have done three sets," said Betty, dropping her paint-brush.

"I have finished two." Elsa straightened back her shoulders and stretched her arms.

Miss Ruth reached over to the couch and pulled two cushions down upon the hearth-rug. "You have both done splendidly, and so has Ben. Sit here and rest yourselves now," she said.

"Don't waste any time from the story, please," Betty said in a loud whisper as she seated herself, Turk-fashion, on the large square cushion and leaned her head against Miss Ruth's knees.

"Didn't Miss Dean give you the box, or even show it to you that day?" inquired Ben, who was lying flat upon his stomach, looking into the fire.

"No," replied Miss Ruth, "not that day."

"I think she was mean to forget it," said outspoken Betty.

"Wait till we've heard the end of the story," exclaimed Elsa, who had curled up on her cushion against the heavy brass stand which held the fire-tongs and shovel.

"Do you know the end of it?" Betty asked quickly.

"No, — only I know anybody so nice as Miss Dean will be the same at the end," Elsa said, with a very earnest expression in her eyes.

"I'll bet I know what was in that box," cried Ben, from his position on the centre of the rug.

"What?" asked Betty.

"Hens' eggs to hatch," Ben replied confidently.

"The idea!" exclaimed Betty. "Just as if Miss Dean would have given a girl hens' eggs for a present! Now keep still, Ben."

"We can have only a bit more of the story to-day, because it is almost five o'clock," said Miss Ruth, putting her hand softly over Betty's mouth, which began to frame an objecting "O!" Then she continued:

When I came home from Miss Dean's, grandmother felt dreadfully to think that the little old lady had been ill there all alone by herself. "I must send her some nourishing things to eat," said grandmother; "I would have Barker go now" — he was the hired man — "but he is off hauling wood, and Jenny" — that was his wife — "has a bad cold."

I said "O, grandmother, let me go!" For I was wondering, harder than ever, what was in the

lacquered box. But grandmother said, "No, child, you have been out enough to-day in this bad walking. You may go over, though, early in the morning."

The clock pealed out five as Miss Ruth stopped with these words.

"Just a little more," urged Betty.

"This will be a good place to begin again," said Miss Ruth; "we will have the rest of the story at the next Club meeting, if you like."

"I want it now," insisted Betty; "I can stay."

"But I can't," said Ben, "only about a minute longer. I will think the first part over, going home, to tell Alice."

"I hope she can come to the next meeting," said Elsa, with a loyal thought for her little friend.

"You must tell her, Ben, that we have missed her a great deal," Miss Ruth said.

"And give her the Club's love," added Elsa.

"I like to have you do that," said Betty, who had given up teasing and suddenly grown very quiet as Miss Ruth passed her hand slowly over the rumpled brown hair.

Elsa looked on, from her seat against the tall brass fire-stand. She was too loving-natured to be

jealous, but she would have dearly liked to be in Betty's place, there against Miss Ruth's knees. Still, Elsa was very happy. Miss Ruth's dark red dress was so warm-looking in the firelight, and the room seemed so pleasant; it was restful and delightful just to be there. Elsa felt this keenly, although she would not have been able to put it into words.

"Do you know what fire-sparks are?" asked Ben, who was leaning on his elbows with his chin in his hands, and looking straight into the glowing fire. "Sparks are the sunbeams that got shut up in the wood while the tree was growing, and now they are going up the chimney and back into the air again."

Sarah Judd, passing the library door to light the hall lamp, looked in for a moment, unnoticed by the Club. "It do seem good to see them children stretched out in front of the fire and havin' such a good time," she said to herself, with one of the unexpectedly cracking-like smiles upon her grim face.

The day after this meeting of the Club Miss Virginia Warren took a cold from having her room overheated. "I am really worried about myself,"

she said after her niece had spent most of the day trying to make her comfortable.

"But the doctor says it is only a cold, and that your heart is in no danger," said Ruth Warren; "to be sure, a cold is uncomfortable enough to make one wretched," she added. "Let me open that farther window; a little fresh air will make you feel better."

"O, no, no!" cried Miss Virginia, drawing her thick white shawl closer around herself at the thought. "Don't excite me so, Ruth. There's no telling what may happen. My heart seems very feeble," she went on, after trying for a half-moment to count the pulse-beats in her own wrist. "I am more and more certain that I must have a nurse to watch my pulse and look out every moment for draughts. Yes, I really must ask you now to see about a nurse," added Miss Virginia, clasping one large hand over the other wrist to keep track of her heart-beats.

Ruth Warren consulted the doctor.

"Your aunt doesn't need a nurse any more than you or I need one," he said, gruffly. "Better have one, though, and I will order her to open the windows every hour of the day. We will give your aunt a little training, and it may do her good."

As a result of this conversation, and of a plan which she found she could carry out, Ruth Warren called a few days later at Mrs. Danforth's.

"Mrs. Danforth isn't very well to-day, miss, and she asks will you come up to her room, please," said Cummings; so Ruth Warren followed the stiff-backed maid up the polished stairs. From the top of the stairs she saw, just ahead, a room all furnished in white, which she knew must be Elsa's. "What an unpretty room for a child!" she said to herself.

Mrs. Danforth had on a beautiful white dressing-gown with long lace ruffles hanging from the sleeves, and she was leaning back in a blue velvet chair. "She does not look so ill as unhappy," Ruth Warren thought to herself.

Not wishing to take any more time than was necessary, Ruth Warren began at once to give the reason for her call:

"Elsa has told me, Mrs. Danforth, of a nurse she once had by the name of Bettina March. Curiously enough, I find that this same Bettina March has quite lately been employed at the Convalescent Home here in Berkeley. She was very much liked, but she was not strong, and went away, hoping to return. She is not yet able to take up

the work, and she is anxious to find some occupation which will give her, for a time, less active duties."

"Well, and what of it?" inquired Mrs. Danforth coldly, fixing her eyes upon her visitor's face. She and Miss Ruth had exchanged calls formally; that was all the acquaintance they had, save a chance meeting, now and then.

"I should not have intruded upon you with a personal matter, Mrs. Danforth, except for good reason," Ruth Warren said quietly. "My Aunt Virginia, who, as you know, lives with me, feels the need of having a nurse; it will be an easy position and one which Bettina March can easily fill, as my aunt is by no means very ill. I came to ask if you have any objection to my engaging Bettina March?"

"Is it that you wish to inquire of me in regard to Bettina March's character?" demanded Mrs. Danforth. "I know nothing against her."

Now Mrs. Danforth was accustomed to have people a little afraid of her. She was rather surprised, therefore, to find that Ruth Warren did not show any embarrassment, but went on, in a quite simple and perfectly self-possessed manner, to say: "It is not that, Mrs. Danforth. The head-nurse

at the Convalescent Home has satisfied me entirely with regard to the woman's character. It is only on Elsa's account that I have come to you."

"Why should I object to your employing Bettina March on Elsa's account?" Mrs. Danforth made things as hard as she could for Ruth Warren.

"Because my house is next to yours, and Elsa has told me that you were unwilling to have her keep up any acquaintance with her old nurse," Ruth Warren replied, in the same even-toned voice.

Mrs. Danforth felt now obliged to explain. "Bettina March was nurse to Elsa's mother during her last illness, and after the mother died stayed on with Elsa until her father died. I felt that the child was growing too dependent on the woman. Elsa is almost entirely without relatives. Her mother was an only child, and her father had only one brother, Mr. Ned Danforth. If he should marry, or if I should die, Elsa would be quite alone in the world and she would need to be self-reliant. I did not think she was a child who would talk over my affairs," Mrs. Danforth remarked haughtily.

Ruth Warren could not let Elsa stand in a false light before her grandmother's eyes. Therefore

she suddenly decided to tell the story of the child's grief over the giving away of her doll.

The coldness of Mrs. Danforth's blue eyes gave way, little by little, to a softer expression as Ruth Warren described Elsa's visit to her, that late evening.

"So she was brave enough to go out of the house alone at night, and she kept the loss of the doll from me for fear it would hurt my feelings," said Mrs. Danforth half to herself, toying with a silver paper-cutter the while. "Of course I did not know that the child cared anything about the doll."

"That is what Elsa said," returned Ruth Warren, quite eagerly now. Then she went on in a lower tone: "Elsa seems to me a keenly sensitive, thoughtful and affectionate-natured little girl, but very much repressed. As I have observed her — her shyness and her pale face — I cannot help thinking that what she needs more than anything else is to have some love shown her, and to feel free to show her own affection." Ruth Warren rose to go, feeling that perhaps she had said too much.

"Wait a moment," said Mrs. Danforth, not unkindly. "You mean to tell me that I am too severe with the child?" She remembered, with an un-

comfortable feeling, that Mrs. White had said much the same thing.

"Not too severe in the matter of discipline, but —" Ruth Warren left the sentence unfinished.

"On the whole, I thank you, Miss Warren," said Mrs. Danforth slowly. "I am sure you have Elsa's best interest at heart. I am grateful to you for taking charge of the little Club. It has made me feel safe in regard to her. Do you think that the Holt children are perfectly suitable companions for Elsa, in every way?" she asked suddenly.

"They are perfectly suitable companions for any children, I am sure," Ruth Warren said warmly. "They are charming little children, well-trained and gentle-mannered. The boy is mischievous, but he is perhaps all the more likeable for his liveliness, and he is very manly with his mother and his little sister. I have seen the mother several times, and I have never met a more attractive or charming woman, — or a braver woman."

A quick flush reddened Mrs. Danforth's face, then died away as suddenly as it came. Reaching out a trembling hand, she rang for her maid, who appeared as if she had risen out of the blue velvet carpeted floor.

"Cummings, some water," said Mrs. Danforth,

with an evident effort. Then she leaned back against her chair and closed her eyes.

Ruth Warren had started to leave the room, but fearing lest Mrs. Danforth should faint, she stood waiting for Cummings to return.

As she waited, she noticed, half unconsciously at first, then with a quick start of interest, an oil-painting hanging upon the softly tinted wall, back of Mrs. Danforth's chair, — an oil-painting of a large, gable-windowed house, exactly like the one at Mrs. Holt's. Ruth Warren remembered it particularly because of one small red-leaved maple tree at the left hand corner of the picture; and she also remembered Elsa's exclamation over Mrs. Holt's picture. She looked again at Mrs. Danforth's white, set face, and a haunting resemblance flashed through her mind, leaving her fairly bewildered.

Just then Cummings came in with a glass of water. Mrs. Danforth opened her eyes, drank the water, and appeared instantly better. "I have these dizzy attacks once in a while, Miss Warren," she said in her usual stately manner, "but they pass off quickly. I am sorry this happened while you were here. Thank you for coming. I am sure you will find Bettina March a very useful woman."

Then Ruth Warren, turning many things over

in her mind, went home, leaving Mrs. Danforth to her pride and loneliness.

It had chanced that, coming from a drive by way of Berkeley Avenue the day before, and having Elsa with her, Mrs. Danforth had met a young, fair-haired, plainly dressed woman walking along slowly between a boy and a girl who looked very much alike, although the boy was the taller.

Mrs. Holt had been to the shops that afternoon with her children, and in the basket which Ben was carrying so carefully, were the precious Christmas remembrances they had bought for the dear father out in Colorado. Mrs. Holt's face was unusually sad, for this would be the first Christmas that she had ever been parted from her husband, and she felt the separation more and more keenly as the days drew near to Christmas.

Elsa had leaned forward and waved eagerly behind the closed window of the coupé. The twins had smilingly waved their hands in turn. The tired-looking, sad-faced mother, in bowing to Elsa, had given a sudden, startled look at Mrs. Danforth.

The encounter had been over in a half-moment, for the strong gray horse was going swiftly toward home.

"It is Alice and Ben and their mother, grand-

mother," Elsa had cried excitedly. "Don't you remember about 'Sweet Alice and Ben Bolt?' Only their name is Holt."

Fearing that her grandmother's silence meant reproof, Elsa had looked around. Mrs. Danforth was sitting very white-faced and rigid, against the coupé cushions. She did not speak again during the drive.

This was the first time that Mrs. Danforth and Mrs. Holt had met, face to face, in Berkeley; and it was the memory of this meeting, which Mrs. Danforth could not put out of her mind, that kept her in her own room the next day. Through shutting out love from her life, Mrs. Danforth had burnt her heart almost to ashes.

CHAPTER VI

THE BOY IN THE CLUB

You hear that boy laughing? You think he's all fun?
But the angels laugh, too, at the good he has done.
—*Oliver Wendell Holmes.*

BEN HOLT, driving slowly along the main business street of Berkeley, Friday morning, about half past nine o'clock, stopped his horse as he saw the tall figure and met the gray eyes of Elsa Danforth's uncle.

"Good morning, sir," the boy said, jumping from the sleigh with a sudden inspiration. "I would like to ask your advice, sir," he added, diffidently.

Mr. Danforth had instantly recognized the boy of the Club. "Well, Ben, my boy; what is it about?" he asked in his quick way of speaking.

Ben's usually cheerful face was very sober and earnest. Mr. Danforth noticed on the seat of the sleigh a queer-shaped bundle covered with what

looked suspiciously like a blue-and-white flannel night-shirt.

"What do you want my advice about? Christmas presents?" the tall man asked kindly, seeing that the boy found some difficulty in making his request.

"No, sir, it isn't Christmas presents," Ben replied sadly, taking a few steps forward and putting his arm around Jerry's long nose. "I am going to run away, sir; but I had promised to give five of the little Convalescings a sleigh-ride this morning, at eleven o'clock, and I've been trying to find some safe fellow — man," said Ben, correcting himself, — "who will take them for me, somebody the head-nurse will trust. Do you suppose you could do it?" The boy looked up with such a wistful expression that Mr. Danforth felt quite touched, although he felt also, that Ben was looking him over very carefully and trying to decide whether the head-nurse would approve of him. "You could leave Jerry at my house when you come home; it's not a very long ways to walk back to Elsa's. Of course I — I couldn't tell mother of mine that — that I was going to run away." Ben's face showed that he was very miserable.

"Let me get into the sleigh with you and we will

talk it over," Mr. Danforth said, stepping in quickly. Ben sprang in at the other side and pushed the blue-and-white flannel bundle to the floor, under the seat.

"Now, first of all, tell me why you are going to run away?" Mr. Danforth inquired in such a friendly, sympathetic tone that Ben could not help opening his heart at once.

"I want to earn a lot of money, sir. You see, my father's away teaching, and he isn't very well, so he can't send us much money. And mother — mother has to buy so many things, she was counting on her fingers last night, — coal, and things to eat, and clothes, and pay the hired man, and pay the rent, and she just gets all the fingers paid off and she has to begin again. She spent her last money yesterday for coal, and she won't have any more till the first of January, and I can't stand it, sir; I've got to earn some money to help her." Ben turned aside with a sound very much like a sob, but which of course must not be heard from a boy who was going to run away. Bravely facing ahead again after a moment he added: "I want to earn a lot of money, so that mother won't have to work so hard and so that we can go and live with father."

"Do you help your mother any now?" Mr. Danforth inquired in the same quick, sympathetic voice.

"Yes, sir, a little; I feed and take care of the hens and I do errands and shovel snow and help with the market-garden, and I talk over things with mother, and I take the Convalescings out driving pleasant Saturday mornings and vacations." Ben named everything he could think of, for he wanted to prove that he was a capable and trusty boy. He looked up, anxiously: "Maybe, as you live in the city, you could tell me where to begin work?"

"Who will do all those things for your mother if you run away, Ben?" came the next question.

"Why — she can hire a boy with the money I send," Ben answered, miserably.

"I wouldn't run away just yet, Ben, if I were you," said Mr. Danforth very gravely. "Your mother might get used to that other boy. Boys who run away always want to come back home, and once in awhile their fathers and mothers won't let them come back, but send them off to some institution. Think it over awhile, Ben. It's queer, but you are the very boy I wanted to see this morning."

Ben turned questioningly toward his companion. There was a keen, clear sparkle in Mr. Danforth's gray eyes, and good-humoured lines around his firm mouth.

"What do you say to our spending a part of the morning at that wonderful hut near your house, which Elsa has told me about? We can talk some more of your running away, and I want your advice about a Christmas surprise for the Club."

Seeing the hesitation which yet remained in Ben's earnest blue eyes, Mr. Danforth continued: "Now, Ben, I have given you my advice, and it's only fair that you should give me yours. I think I shall want to hire you and your horse some day next week, and I will pay you fifty cents an hour, and for this morning's time, too."

"Jerry's a fine horse to work, because he's so steady, sir," replied Ben, yielding by slow degrees. "But the Convalescings expect me at eleven o'clock."

Jerry had turned, unheeded by Ben, into Berkeley Avenue and was jogging quite spiritedly in the direction of home.

"It is not ten o'clock yet," said Mr. Danforth, taking out his watch. "You can help me an hour

and then keep your engagement with the children. I wouldn't have you disappoint them."

"All right, sir," Ben said, more cheerfully than he had yet spoken, although his face sobered again immediately as he added: "I'll leave my bundle in the hut, then it will be ready any time I decide to start. Of course, I'd lots rather earn some money and stay at home. But it's sorrowful-like, sir, to see your mother needing money so much." Again Ben turned aside his face, and when Mr. Danforth kindly looked the other way, the boy drew his red-mittened hand across his eyes.

Any one who had been near the log hut in the tall pine woods not far from Ben's home that morning, would have seen a broad-shouldered man in a heavy winter overcoat and a slip of a boy in a tight blue reefer jacket sitting in the warm sunshine on the sheltered platform of the hut, very earnestly talking together and advising one another, while old Jerry, blanketed carefully, stood near by without being hitched, and overhead, dusky crows and gleaming blue-jays chattered vigorously, a gray chickadee or a downy woodpecker occasionally putting in a word.

Mr. Ned Danforth had surprised and delighted his niece Elsa almost beyond bounds by appearing

in Berkeley the evening before, and announcing that he should stay at least until Christmas, a whole week.

After his father, Judge Danforth, had died, and after the death of Elsa's father a few months later, Mr. Ned Danforth had agreed with his stepmother that it was wise for her to close her New York home, and also that Berkeley was a good place for motherless and fatherless Elsa to live in. Some day, when his little niece should become a young lady, Mr. Danforth hoped to have her live with him. He had missed the child greatly, indeed, out of his New York life, and his flying visit to Berkeley of a few weeks ago — the first time he had seen Elsa since September — had caused him to wonder whether she was wholly happy in her life alone with Mrs. Danforth, although the child made no complaint.

It was particularly to set his mind at rest upon this point that he had told Elsa he would pay her fifty cents a week if she would write a four-page letter to him twice a week; for he felt that in these letters she would probably tell him freely just what he wanted to know. Before this, Elsa had written him once a week, and always a short letter, saying that grandmother was well and she was well; that

school was pleasant because she liked her school girl friends; that Berkeley was a pretty place and the weather was growing colder; that she missed him ever and ever so much, and was his affectionate little niece, Elsa.

But the first long letter he received had run thus:

"DEAREST UNCLE NED:—

"Grandmother is well and so am I. O, I am so glad you came to see me. Pleas come again soon. School is most over and I am sorry for I shall miss seeing my little girl friends. Grandmother does not like to have little girls come to see me. She lets me go to the Club though. Miss Ruth is lovely. I take a red rose to her most every day and she puts it in to a tall green glass vase in her window so I see it when I go to bed and it doesent make me feel so lonesum. I shall be sorry when school closes because it will seem lonesummer to eat breakfast and supper alone. It is a very nice nayborhood. Miss Ruth is busy most of the time taking care of her poor sick aunt who doesent like children I guess because she told us to go right away children one day she had asked the club to go up stairs to see her. Betty White has the beautifulest nursery to sleep in you ever

saw it makes me think of very interesting picture book or a Jacobs coat of many colors. Bettys mother lets her decide things. I wish grandmother would let me. I wish grandmother would let me have some pink or blue paper on my room. It is all so white. I feels if I slept out doors in snow.

"I am reading David Copperfield. I think it is a very good and interesting book and it is so real and true. I like Agnes W. better than any caracter and I think D. C. is sorry he fell in love with Dora and I wish he had more courage when he is with Urriah H and tell U. H. that he is a sneak and coward and give him a blow or two. I like Mr. Peggotty and Ham and Peggotty and Aunt Bettesy Trotwood and I also like Mr. Dick and all two gether it is a fine book. Will you tell me the name of a book to read next because when school closes I will have to read to keep from being lonesum like September when I first came. This is four pages and I wish you would come to see your poor lonesum ELSA.

"P. S. dont forget about the hut.

"P. S. David was so crushed and frightened when he was little and had no good times. I think he hasent got over it yet."

Mr. Danforth had decided from this and just such another long letter, that his little niece was leading a lonely and repressed life with her grandmother, and that it was this fact which was making the child pale-faced and hollow-eyed, rather than the school-life, as Mrs. Danforth had suggested. So when the head of the banking-house to which he belonged decided to establish a branch office in the large city near Berkeley, Mr. Danforth at once agreed to take charge of it. What were New York clubs and big dinners in comparison with the welfare and happiness of one little pathetic, gray-eyed, "lonesum" girl?

And this was the reason of Mr. Ned Danforth's being in Berkeley, although he had not as yet told Elsa that he would soon come to stay permanently.

Thursday had been the last day of the school term, and this Friday would be the last meeting of the Club before Christmas. Ben and Alice had called for Betty at half-past two o'clock. Mrs. White had with difficulty kept them and Betty from starting for Ruth Warren's before three o'clock.

The moment Elsa, watching from the hall-window, saw the little group leave Betty's house, she sped like an arrow to join them, having been ready for the last half-hour.

It was a merry, excited group of four children who ran up the front steps of the Warren house very promptly at three o'clock on the afternoon of December 18. Elsa had forgotten all about being sorry that school had closed, now that Uncle Ned had come; Ben had forgotten all about his intense desire to run away from home; Alice had forgotten all about the cold which had kept her from the last Club meeting, and Betty, on her part, had forgotten pretty nearly all that she had learned in school the last term; indeed, she had almost forgotten that there ever was any school.

The open fire was burning brightly; the five unfinished sets of paper dolls, the paints and the brushes were ready on the table; and Miss Ruth, in her golden-brown, fur-trimmed gown, welcomed the Club with a feeling of real pleasure in having all these lively children coming to her house. She was heartily glad her Aunt Virginia had decided that she liked the children's noise, for Ben came in with an unmistakable "Whoop!" and cried out, "No more school!" and the other children began talking rapidly.

"May I bring my Christmas presents and keep them here?" questioned Betty. "Max and Janet find every single thing I hide away."

"My Uncle Ned has come to stay till Christmas," exclaimed Elsa; "he's gone to the city this afternoon, or maybe I shouldn't have wanted to come even to the Club!"

"I've brought back the two sets of paper dolls you sent for me to paint," piped in Alice. "And Ben's brought something to show you."

Thereupon Ben opened the box he had in his hand, and blushing with pride, showed the Club ten tops he had carved, carefully and well, painted with bright colours. "They are for the Convalescings," he explained when the girls gave him a chance to speak; "and I think I'll have time to make a few more."

"Mamma is making some of the beautifulest rag dolls," exclaimed Alice enthusiastically.

"We must finish painting the paper dolls this afternoon," cried Betty, "for just think, Christmas comes a week from to-day."

"Can we take the dolls out to the Convalescent Home, Miss Ruth?" Elsa asked, with shining eyes.

"Yes, we can all go there Christmas morning. I have arranged that with Miss Hartwell. With the dolls Mrs. Holt is making, and ours, we shall have enough to give a doll to every little girl there; and with Ben's tops and some tin soldiers which

I am going to provide for the boys, we shall have something for every boy."

"O, goody!" exclaimed Betty, while Elsa and Alice clapped their hands, and Ben turned a somersault on the hearth-rug.

"Now please finish the story, Miss Ruth," said Betty. "You left off where Ruth's grandmother — I mean your grandmother — was going to let you go to see the little old lady the next morning."

Betty, Alice, and Elsa immediately drew their chairs up to the table, and chose their paint-brushes, ready to begin on the paper dolls. But Ben remained standing before the fireplace, and, after putting one hand in his pocket to make sure he had not lost the two silver quarter dollars he had earned that morning, he clasped his hands behind him. Ben was dreadfully hungry, for he had been outdoors all the morning, and even the good dinner he had eaten since then had left his appetite unsatisfied. He forgot that Miss Ruth always had something for the Club to eat, so he looked very steadily at her and asked frankly: "Please, Black Lace Lady, have you got any crackers or cookies? I'm hungry as two bears, and I'd a good deal rather ask right out for something to eat than hint for it."

"Why, Ben Holt!" gasped Alice, whose cheeks

turned a very deep pink in a moment. She came and laid her chubby hand on Ruth Warren's arm: "Excuse him, please, Miss Ruth. He knows better." Alice felt dreadfully ashamed of Ben.

Ruth Warren stroked Alice's hand affectionately: "Never mind, dear. I ought to know better than to keep a hungry boy waiting for something to eat. Sarah has made some plum buns for you."

"The same as we had for our first meeting!" cried Betty, tossing her hair out of her eyes.

"Yes, because Peggy brought some to me," Ben said. "Here they are now," he exclaimed, looking up engagingly into Sarah Judd's face as she came through the library doorway, in her stiffest starched white apron, carrying a very large plate piled high with crisp plum buns.

"Thank you, ma'am," Ben said with a polite bow. Stepping forward, he took the plate from Sarah, and passed it first to Miss Ruth, then to the girls.

Sarah stood still, watching anxiously. "They are pretty crumby," she said, looking from the plate to the floor, "and —" but as she caught Miss Ruth's eye, she stopped; then, drawing a long breath like a sigh, she said heroically: "Never

mind the crumbs, little folks; I'm a-goin' to sweep to-morrow."

"I think you are very, very good to the Club, Sarah," said Betty.

"Thank you, oh, thank you," cried Elsa, with thoughtful courtesy, while little Alice smiled and looked more than ever like a dimple-faced doll.

Sarah's curls were bobbing excitedly as she went out of the room, saying under her breath: "The cunnin' little dears!"

"Please, *please,* the story now," entreated Betty.

"Guess I won't paint to-day," Ben announced. "May I lie down by the fire again?"

"Yes, — take a cushion and take some buns, Ben," Ruth Warren answered, moving her chair aside.

"Let me do that," said Ben, springing instantly to help.

"Thank you," returned Miss Ruth. Then, seating herself, she said: "Now I will go on with the story."

By nine o'clock the next morning, I was teasing my grandmother to let me start for Miss Dean's. But it was almost eleven before Jenny, the cook,

had the broth and little cakes and jelly in a basket for me to carry to Miss Dean. I remember hurrying so fast over the uneven, snowy street that I spilled some of the broth.

Miss Dean saw me coming and opened the front door the moment I set foot on the top step. She was dressed in a soft gray cloth gown and she looked ever so much better than she had the day before, in fact her cheeks were quite pink and her eyes sparkled as she said: "I thought that as I had been ill and you were coming again to see me, we would have a party; and I have invited Susie to the party."

The bedroom — or the sitting-room as it really was except in winter — looked very cozy. Miss Dean had spread a bright-coloured silk patchwork quilt over the bed, and there in the little rocking-chair, near by, sat Susie in a white muslin dress looped up with tiny pink rosebuds over a blue satin skirt.

"That is Susie's ball costume," Miss Dean said; "I didn't show it to you yesterday because I felt it might be wrong to let you know that I approved of balls and dancing; but I decided to-day that it wouldn't do any harm. My mother didn't like to have me learn to dance, but I don't see anything

wrong in Susie's going to parties and balls, just to look on, anyway."

My eyes had travelled from Susie to the black- and gold lacquered box, which now stood upon the low table by the side of Susie's chair. I think Miss Dean must have seen me looking at it, for in a moment she said:

"I felt so bad to think I forgot to give you that box yesterday. That is one reason I am having the party to-day. Take it now, to please a little old lady." As she handed it to me, I remember she said, "My, how your eyes dance, child!"

I opened the box, and found inside two smaller black and gold lacquered boxes that just fitted the space. The first one I opened had in it a beautiful coral necklace —

"The one you have on now?" cried Betty, dropping her paint-brush and coming to Miss Ruth's side.

"Yes, the very one," Miss Ruth answered. "You have quick eyes, Betty."

Elsa and the twins crowded around to look at the exquisitely cut, pinkish-red coral necklace.

"What was in the other box?" Betty asked. "It seems to me I can't wait to hear!"

"The other box proved to be a dainty work-box with an ivory thimble, ivory-handled scissors and an ivory-covered needle-book. As I told you, Miss Dean's father had been a sea-captain, and he had brought these things from a foreign country."

"Have you kept the boxes, Miss Ruth?" Elsa asked shyly.

"Yes," replied Miss Ruth: "I have the large box and the two smaller boxes."

"O, do show them to us, please," Betty entreated. The others waited with greatest interest.

"I thought you might like to see them, so I brought them down." Ruth Warren rose and took from a drawer of her writing-desk a richly lacquered box; and the girls, with Ben, spent the next few moments in examining and admiring the big box, the smaller boxes, and the dainty ivory articles.

"I brought down something else to show you," Miss Ruth said. "Can you guess what?"

"A stuffed Arctic owl," suggested Ben, taking a fresh supply of plum buns while he was up.

"O, Ben! Can't you think of anything but birds and horses and hens' eggs!" cried Betty.

"Yes, — I think of the poor little Convalescings," said Ben self-defensively.

"I know, I know!" exclaimed Elsa, almost breathlessly. "It is Susie!"

"Elsa has guessed right. It is Susie, — the little old lady's doll," said Miss Ruth, going to the tall mahogany bookcase which wholly filled one side of the room. The children followed her and watched with closest attention while she took from a lower shelf a large white box. Unrolling the stout white paper covering, she opened the box-cover, took out the old-fashioned doll, and held her up before the children's eyes.

Betty was the first to speak. "What a queer old thing," she said.

"O, she has on the ball dress," cried Alice, timidly touching one of the tiny pink rosebuds which looped up the muslin dress over the blue silk petticoat.

"You dear doll!" said Elsa softly.

"She *is* kind of quaint and pretty," Betty said, after a good second look.

Ben gave a low whistle, but said nothing. He thought the doll was a beauty. The tiny pink rosebuds had won his heart.

Susie was a china-headed doll, with stiff, unjointed arms. Her black hair, parted and drawn down over her ears, her very black eyes, bright red

cheeks and rounded mouth gave her an old-time appearance both quaint and attractive.

"How well you have kept her," exclaimed Betty. Her own dolls had all suffered some misfortune, such as broken arms or hairless heads.

"I did not have Susie until I was sixteen years old," Miss Ruth said, "and then I was too old to play with her."

"Do girls have to stop playing with dolls when they are sixteen years old?" Elsa inquired anxiously.

"O no," Miss Ruth replied; "but girls of sixteen are usually too busy with study and other things to have time for dolls."

"How did you happen to get the old doll?" Ben asked. He did not mean to be disrespectful; it was only a boy's way of speaking.

"That comes at the end of the story," Miss Ruth answered. "Are you ready for me to go on?"

Everybody said, "Yes," and Elsa added: "I will put Susie in a rocking-chair and we can look at her and that will make the story seem more real than ever."

"That is just the way Miss Dean used to have her," said Miss Ruth, as Elsa placed the doll in a

small rocking-chair upon a cushion and drew the chair toward the table.

"I remember," Elsa answered.

Once more the girls took up their paint-brushes and went to work, while Ben stretched himself again upon the hearth-rug in his favourite position; and then the story-teller began again:

Miss Dean had been making ready for our party all the morning, I think, because we had so many things to eat. She seemed not to want to use anything which grandmother had sent. First, we had hot biscuit and little meat-balls; then we had chocolate frosted cake, currant-jelly tarts and plum preserves, with hot chocolate to drink.

"May we have Susie at the table with us?" I asked just as we were sitting down; so Miss Dean sat Susie on the dictionary in the tallest chair, and she put food on a plate for Susie, just as she did for me. When I wasn't looking, Miss Dean slipped the food off to a plate on a side table, and then put more food in front of the doll, urging her in such a pretty way to eat more. I never shall forget how young and happy Miss Dean looked that day at the table, with such a kind, motherly expression in her large brown eyes.

We were just eating some preserved ginger and drinking the last of our chocolate, and Miss Dean was saying: "I am sure Susie would enjoy company very much indeed if she had more of it," when there came a knock at the front door and my grandmother walked into the room. She and Miss Dean were such near neighbours and good friends that when either one called upon the other, she did not wait at the door, but walked in.

Miss Dean rose, greeted my grandmother, and then looked at me in such a timid, appealing manner that I knew she was thinking of Susie and wondering what my grandmother would think of the doll being there.

Grandmother sat down very straight in her chair, I remember, and looked around in her pleasant way. Her eyesight wasn't very good. Probably, too, she didn't remember how my own dolls looked. For very soon she said: "I see that Ruth brought her doll to have luncheon with you, Phœbe," — grandmother always called Miss Dean by her first name.

I held my breath till Miss Dean answered: "That isn't Ruth's doll — yet; but it is one I am going to give her."

If grandmother had been looking in my direc-

tion, I am sure she would have seen me jump at the thought that Susie was to be mine.

"How kind of you, Phœbe," grandmother said. "I hope Ruth has thanked you properly."

Miss Dean turned toward me with a helpless expression, just as grandmother added: "Isn't it strange how children always like to make company of their dolls and make believe they can eat?"

"I wanted to have Susie at the table," I said eagerly, half ready to cry, because I felt so sorry for Miss Dean.

"So you have named the doll Susie," grandmother said.

Miss Dean turned to me again with that distressed look in her brown eyes.

"No," I said, "that was Miss Dean's name for her, but I like it." And after that, grandmother began talking about something else. Her visit was short. When she went, she said: "Come home soon, Ruth, or you will be tiring Miss Phœbe, and don't forget to thank her prettily for the doll."

After closing the door behind grandmother, Miss Dean all of a sudden dropped into a chair. "I was going to give the doll to you, anyway, Ruth," she said, hardly above a whisper. The pink colour had all gone out of her face.

"O no!" I said, — the way children do when they want a thing very much and know they ought not to take it.

"But I have told your grandmother that I was going to give the doll to you." Miss Dean's voice trembled now, and the next moment I saw her brown eyes fill with tears.

"I have ever so many dolls," I cried, naming over six or seven, "and really, Miss Dean, I would rather have Susie here, because it will be all the nicer when I come to see you." I remember thinking so just then, because Miss Dean was unhappy about it.

"What will your grandmother think of me? what will she think of me?" Miss Dean spoke with a real sob in her voice.

Then I knew more surely than before that I must not take Susie away. I petted Miss Dean and talked and talked until she dried her eyes and asked me if I didn't want to try Susie's dresses on again, so that I would be used to her ways, as long as she was truly going to be mine some day.

I remember that about as fast as Miss Dean began to feel better I began to feel worse. While she put away the food and the dishes in that clean, dainty kitchen, I played with the doll, dressing and

undressing her; and when I finally pinned the little red shawl over the white nightgown, I am sure two or three of my tears fell upon Susie. Then I knew it was time for me to be going home.

"Are you perfectly sure you don't want to take Susie?" Miss Dean asked me at the door.

"I want you to have her more!" I called back. I could not say another word, so I started and ran for home, hugging the black-and-gold lacquered box under my arm: I had entirely forgotten to show that to grandmother while she was there.

Grandmother was so interested in the box that she seemed to forget all about the doll. But I went to see Miss Dean and Susie almost every day. I had a queer feeling about that doll, — she was mine and yet she wasn't. Perhaps I actually enjoyed her more that way. Once in awhile I found Miss Dean making new dresses for Susie; and then she always said: "I want your doll to have a lot of pretty clothes to wear."

It happened that my father and mother came home from California unexpectedly and sent for me to join them, and I was hurried off without time even to say good-bye to Miss Dean and Susie. It must have been two months after that when I received a letter from Miss Dean. She wrote about

her spring chickens and her garden, chiefly, but at the end of the letter she said, "Susie misses you very much. She grows prettier every day."

When I read this letter to my mother, she asked: "Who is Susie? Some little girl who lives with Miss Dean?"

"O no," I said, "Susie is a doll, and she is going to be mine some day."

Mother didn't ask any more questions. She only said "Oh!" in a funny way.

After that, little by little, I forgot about the doll. Grandmother came to live with us, so I didn't visit her again. But when I was sixteen years old, and had given up playing with dolls, a big bundle came to me by express one day, and in it was Susie dressed in a brown travelling suit. All her other clothes were in the bundle. Miss Dean had died, and had left directions to have the bundle sent to me. With it was a note which Miss Dean had written.

"Have you kept the note?" Betty asked curiously. The three girls had finished all the painting and had quietly drawn around the fire, during the last few moments.

"Yes; here it is." From a yellowed envelope on

her desk, Ruth Warren drew forth a small sheet of paper and read:

"DEAR LITTLE RUTH:—

"When this reaches you, Susie will go with it. She has really been yours ever since that day of our party, and I thank you gratefully for letting me keep her. I have loved her dearly. Some of us poor lonely old folks are not much more than grown-up children. I know you will have a happy time playing with her, and when you are ready to give her away, I hope it will be to some little girl who will love her as fondly as you and I love her. Your affectionate friend,

"PHŒBE DEAN."

"What a dear story!" sighed Elsa. "And how much the poor little old lady must have cared for Susie."

"You have kept all her dresses?" inquired Betty, eying the doll with new interest.

"Yes. When the doll first came, I dressed her in the ball gown, because that was what she had on when Miss Dean really gave her to me. Since then I have thought very little about her. Perhaps I shall keep her and have her for company when I

grow old, just as Miss Dean had her. Or perhaps we might dress her in a newer fashion and give her to one of the Convalescent children."

"O no! no!" objected the girls as with one voice. "She is different: — they will like other dolls just as much," little Alice added.

"She is best in her own old-fashioned dresses," Elsa said thoughtfully, "because she has such a dear old-fashioned face."

"And then Miss Dean wanted you to give her to the little girl who would love her the most," Betty remarked.

"I wonder who that would be?" Elsa said wistfully, as if she were thinking out loud.

"I'm not the one," exclaimed Ben, jingling his silver quarter dollars.

"Of course you are not," cried Betty. "You are only the boy in the Club."

Betty and Ben were so constantly on the border of friendly warfare that Ruth Warren thought it better to change the subject. "Children," she said quickly, beginning to gather the envelopes of paper dolls into a pile, "we have just time enough left to name these dolls. There are twelve of them, and each of you may choose three names. I will write the names on the envelopes. We will let

Ben choose his names first. Will you begin, Ben?"

Ben looked very hard into the fire for a moment.

"Hurry up, Ben," Alice said, giving him a sisterly poke with her foot.

"All right, Peggy," he said, holding the toe of her shoe affectionately. "I'm ready. Katrina for the princess in the Gray Owl story, Alice for my mother and for Peggy, and Ruth for you;" he turned toward Miss Ruth with one of his comical little bows.

The girls clapped their hands and Ruth Warren bowed in return to Ben as she said: "Now, Alice next. We will go from the youngest on."

"I will name my three Love and Hope and Thankful." Alice spoke in a low tone and moved a little nearer to Ben.

But the Club was listening so closely that every one heard. "What funny names!" was Betty's comment, as Miss Ruth wrote them down.

"Mamma has told me stories about old, old ladies she knew of with those names," Alice explained.

"Are they all right names?" she asked anxiously, turning her large blue eyes upon Ruth Warren.

"Yes, dear, they are good, old-fashioned names, and they go well with the old lady and the old doll we have just been talking about. What are your names, Betty?"

"Rose and Rosamond and Julia," Betty answered quickly, her mind being all made up.

"Good." Ruth Warren had these down in a half moment. "And now Elsa?"

Elsa named her list with a little pause between each name: "Phœbe, — for Miss Dean. Agnes, — for the Agnes in 'David Copperfield'" — Elsa's first grown-up book had made a great impression upon her: "Ruth, — for you." The child looked very lovingly from under her long dark lashes at Miss Ruth.

"But we have one Ruth. Ben chose that," objected Betty half jealously.

"Never mind. We can have two of the same name," insisted Elsa spiritedly, although her face coloured sensitively from having all eyes turned upon her.

"None of the Convalescent children will have two paper dolls," said peaceable Alice.

"I'd like to have all the dolls named Ruth," Ben said gallantly.

As Ben did not mind Elsa's having chosen the

same name that he had, Betty did not make any further objection.

"Please, Miss Ruth, ma'am, Mrs. Danforth to see you," Sarah Judd announced at the library door. "She said she wanted to come right in here."

The children, not quite realizing, in the half dusk of the afternoon light, that Mrs. Danforth was close behind Sarah, did not rise until Miss Ruth stepped back from the doorway with her visitor. Accordingly, Mrs. Danforth had a momentary glimpse of them on the hearth-rug, — Betty curled up on a cushion, Elsa leaning in her old position against the brass fire-stand, Alice and Ben seated side by side upon a large, low, old-fashioned ottoman in the centre of the rug. The ruddy flames lighted up their faces vividly.

A moment later, the children were standing, — all except little Alice, one of whose feet had gone to sleep so that she had to kneel upon the ottoman.

Sarah Judd, unnoticed, looked on from the shadow of the doorway at the tall, stately woman in rich sable furs and heavy silk cloak.

"I took the liberty of asking your maid to allow me to come where the children were," Mrs. Dan-

forth said in a beautiful but cold voice. "I wanted to see the Club that Elsa talks about so much."

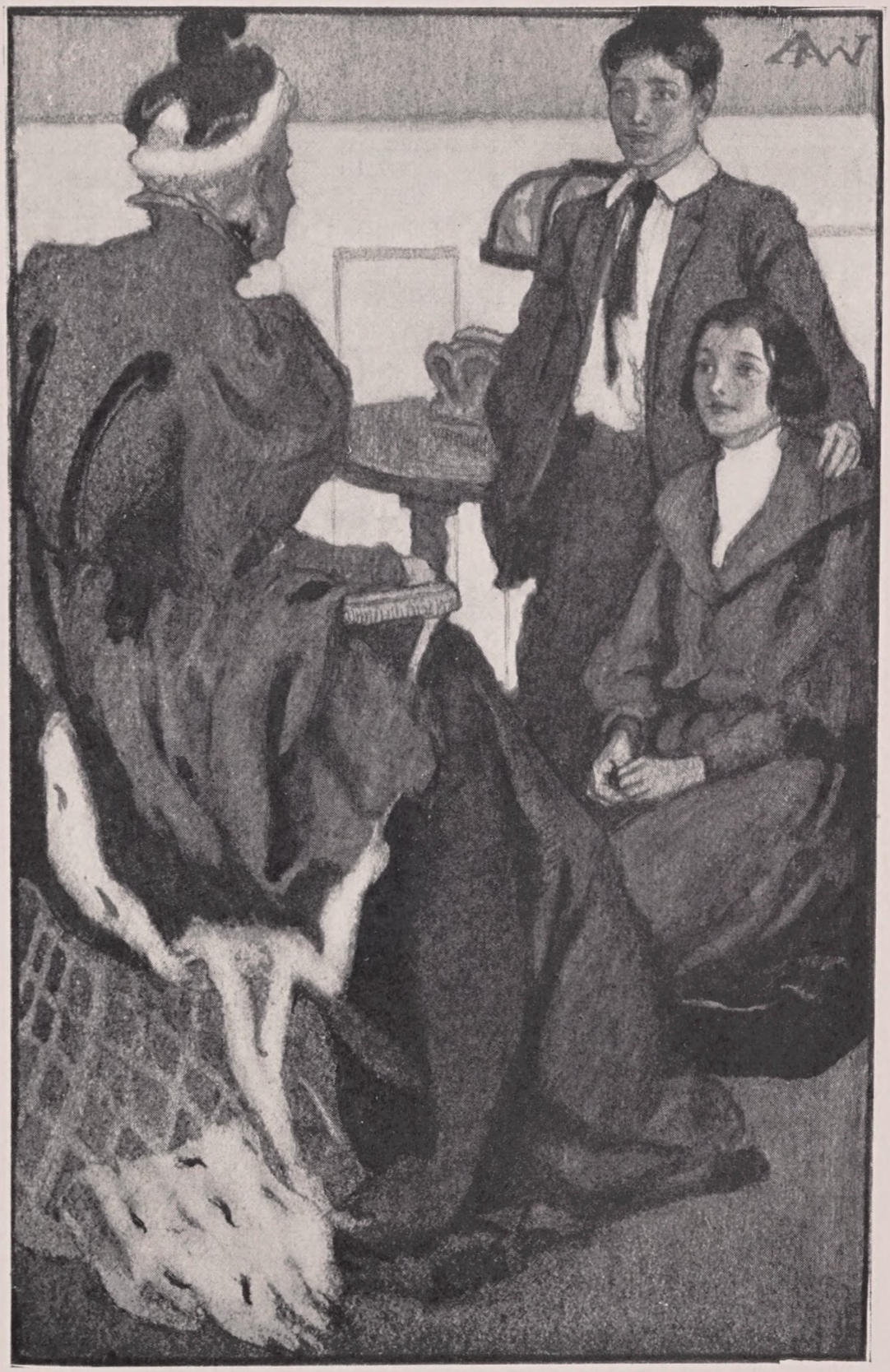
"Pray be seated, Mrs. Danforth; we are delighted to see you," said Ruth Warren, turning to stir the fire into a yet brighter glow. "We like firelight better than any other light," she added. "Sit down, children."

Mrs. Danforth had seated herself very quickly, as her eyes fell upon Alice and Ben.

Betty curled up again on the cushion. Elsa drew a little way back from the fireside into the shadow and sat upright upon a chair. Alice, as if spell-bound by something in Mrs. Danforth's face, remained kneeling upon the ottoman, and Ben stood by his sister's side with his left hand upon her shoulder.

The twins made a striking picture there on the hearth-rug in the full light of the blazing fire, — Alice, fair-haired, delicate-featured, with great soft blue eyes and broad white forehead; Ben with the same colouring of hair and complexion, with boyish, earnest face, frank, handsome blue eyes, slender figure and well-shaped shoulders.

"So, Elsa, these are your friends, Alice and Ben?" Mrs. Danforth asked in a slightly unsteady voice now, loosening her furs as she spoke. She



"THE TWINS MADE A STRIKING PICTURE."

looked very white; and Ruth Warren remembered that Mrs. Danforth had been ill in her room a few days before.

"Yes, grandmother," Elsa's voice answered out of the half-shadow where she was sitting.

The twins nodded their heads. Alice shyly, and Ben quite gravely. "Are you Elsa's grandmother?" he inquired, fixing his blue eyes upon Mrs. Danforth.

She merely bowed her head, and asked in the same rather unsteady voice: "Your last name is what?"

"Holt, ma'am, — Alice and Benjamin Franklin Holt," the boy answered in his clear, musical voice.

Ruth Warren, seated somewhat back from the fireside and closely observing the picture-like group upon the rug, could not help thinking that it looked as if Alice were kneeling before Mrs. Danforth for forgiveness and Ben were standing by her side as her champion.

"How long have you lived here in Berkeley?" Mrs. Danforth's eyes were fixed intently upon Ben. She could not bear to look at Alice because of the child's resemblance to a long-ago little Alice.

"Since the first of last July, ma'am," Ben re-

plied, manfully meeting the almost stern look in the blue eyes bent upon him.

"And where did you live before you came here?" asked Mrs. Danforth sharply.

"Grandmother is almost rude to ask so many questions," thought Elsa in her shadowy corner. Betty was listening with round, wide-open brown eyes. Ruth Warren watched Mrs. Danforth's face now.

"We lived out in New York State. Father was teaching in a college there," Ben explained pleasantly: "his health wasn't very good, though, so he brought us here and stayed a little while, and then he had to go to Colorado, for the doctor said so. We raise lettuce and things to sell, so that father can stay away till he gets better."

"What does your mother do?" Mrs. Danforth asked in a strangely trembling voice.

"Mother? My mother? Oh, she helps with the garden when she is well enough, and she makes some of my clothes and Alice's dresses and keeps 'count of all the eggs I sell and —" he stopped short.

Mrs. Danforth had risen suddenly. Looking toward Elsa, she said: "I want you to come home with me now, Elsa. It is five o'clock and the seam-

stress has some new frocks to try on to you before she goes."

Sarah Judd vanished from the hall.

As if she were weak, Mrs. Danforth steadied herself by the back of the chair, and then turned for another look at the blue-eyed boy before the fire.

With a very genuine desire to be a little gentleman, — as his mother always told him to be, — Ben did the very best thing in the world which he could have done. Stepping forward, though still with his hand upon his sister's shoulder, he looked up into Mrs. Danforth's face and said most respectfully: "I think you are a very nice grandmother. I wish Alice and I had a grandmother."

"Then you have no grandmother?" she asked slowly, with that strange tremble in her voice again, and clasping her hands tight together behind the long sable boa.

"We had one, my father's mother," Ben answered soberly, still with his eyes fixed upon her face, "but that grandmother has gone away to heaven. We don't know about our other grandmother. Mother says she will tell us about her sometime."

Mrs. Danforth made a motion almost as if she

would take the little fellow into her arms. Then she turned abruptly, not trusting herself to stay another moment.

Suddenly, as she turned, it no longer seemed hard for her to begin to carry out the purpose which had brought her to Berkeley, for Ben had walked straight into her heart, and she knew that she could no longer shut love out from her life.

Elsa followed her grandmother out of the room without a word except to say good-bye to the Club.

Ruth Warren found the children in silence when she came back from seeing her guest to the door. She felt that they were wondering, just as she was, whether Mrs. Danforth intended to take Elsa away from the Club, and whether it was because the twins' mother worked sometimes in the market-garden.

It was just the right opportunity for Ruth Warren to put to the children a question which she had in her mind. She began by telling them about Elsa's loss of her doll, but without speaking of Elsa's night visit.

"Poor Elsa," exclaimed Betty, whose generous heart was quickly touched.

"Her dearest doll," sighed Alice, pityingly.

Ben, seated on the ottoman again beside his sister, put his arm close around her.

"If Susie were to be given to any one of you three girls, which would you rather should have her?" Miss Ruth asked.

Betty and Alice looked at one another.

Ben gave Alice a hug and said: "I vote for Elsa's having the doll, — though you didn't ask me!" he added, hanging his head.

From looking at one another, Betty and Alice had turned to look at Susie, who sat on the cushion in the chair by the table, just where Elsa had placed her.

Betty was the first to speak: "If Elsa had Susie, I know she would let us play with her."

Then Alice, generously swallowing her own disappointment, said: "Betty has Max and Janet, and I have Ben, so I — I think Elsa better have Susie."

"Because she has only her grandmother to live with," put in Betty.

"We all agree then," said Miss Ruth, "that Elsa shall be the one to have the little old lady's doll. We will keep it a secret," she added, looking from one to another of the now bright faces. "We will give the doll to her at Christmas, with a note saying it is from all of us."

"Because she has only a grandmother," insisted Betty, forgetting Elsa's Uncle Ned.

Just then they heard the door-bell ring, and a moment later, to their great surprise, Elsa came running into the library, her gray eyes sparkling with delight, her hair in a golden confusion over her shoulders.

"The seamstress wasn't quite ready and grandmother said I might come back, and she wants me to invite you all to a Christmas-tree at our house on Christmas afternoon, and she wants Alice and Ben's mother to come — and Betty's mother — and she says if you will all come — it will be the best Christmas in her whole life!" Elsa stopped breathlessly, her slender figure quivering with excitement and joy.

"A Christmas-tree! What fun, what fun!" cried Betty, jumping up and beginning to dance around the room.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Ben, giving Alice an extra hug.

"May we help get it ready, Elsa?" Betty asked eagerly. In her own home preparing the Christmas tree was one of the great events of the year.

"Yes, yes, I am sure so!" cried Elsa, who in

her transport of happiness was ready to promise anything.

Then they all laughed heartily when little Alice said slowly, as if the fact had just dawned over her mind: "The Club is going to have a Christmas-tree at Elsa's grandmother's!"

"Bless the blue-eyed baby," said Betty; and Ruth Warren, stooping to kiss the child's serious upturned face, wondered if Christmas day would bring some great change into the lives of Alice and Ben.

"Do you think your mother will come to the Christmas-tree, Alice?" Elsa asked. "Grandmother said particularly that I was to tell you she wants your mother to come."

Ben answered for his sister: "She will come, I think, if Peggy and I ask her to. What a splendid grandmother you have, Elsa!" he cried, starting into a sort of war-dance around the room. "I'm going to make a Christmas present for her."

"What is it?" asked Betty, curious instantly.

But Ben was heedless of the question. "Is she very rich?" he inquired, looking at Elsa.

"Yes, I think so," replied Elsa.

"Then I'll do it," he exclaimed, ending his dance with a somersault upon the hearth-rug.

"What is it?" again asked Betty.

"That's telling," Ben answered.

"It will be something nice," said Alice, out of her perfect faith in her brother.

Betty, not at all disturbed by Ben's refusal to tell, went on blissfully: "Then our next meeting of the Club will be the Christmas-tree at Elsa's, and we are all going out to the Convalescent Home with the presents Christmas morning! Don't you think we could have just a little meeting here next Thursday afternoon, Miss Ruth, to talk things over?"

Ruth Warren yielded to the entreaty in four pairs of eyes: "Yes, you may come at three o'clock for an hour's meeting, if you like, and we will have all the things ready to take to the Convalescent Home the next morning."

"I will bring Jerry, Christmas morning, Jerry and the double-seated sleigh, to carry you and the presents out there," offered Ben.

"If any of you have any presents that you want to hang on the Christmas-tree for any of the rest of you," said Elsa, diffidently, yet feeling that it was something which ought to be said, "you could bring them to my house and I am sure grandmother would take care of them for you." Elsa's

few moment's talk with her grandmother had made her feel that she could promise anything in her grandmother's name for Christmas day.

Ruth Warren seated herself in front of the fire for a moment's thought, after this lively meeting of the Club. She was greatly puzzled by Mrs. Danforth's excited manner and her unexpected invitation for Christmas afternoon; and she was deeply interested to see how a little happiness had changed Elsa almost instantly into a light-hearted child like Betty and Alice. She had decided not to tell Elsa, beforehand, that Bettina March was coming to be with her Aunt Virginia, as the day of the nurse's arrival was uncertain, although it would probably be Christmas day.

Her thinking was interrupted by the appearance of Sarah Judd, who came to take away the plate, which had been entirely emptied of plum buns.

"I don't wonder you're all tuckered out," said Sarah severely, finding her young mistress sitting quietly in front of the fire; "such lively children, chatterin' like magpies, — cunnin' little things, though, they be," she added with one of her sudden changes of tone.

Sarah brushed the crumbs from the table into

the plate. Then, because she was so interested in the subject that she could not keep silent about it another moment, she said: "Beggin' your pardon, Miss Ruth, but did you notice how like Mrs. Danforth's that little twin girl's eyes and forehead are, — a sight more than her own grandchild's?"

"Sarah, you are just imagining that," replied Ruth Warren. "You could only have seen them together for a moment."

"That was long enough," said Sarah, who did not think it necessary to explain that she had stood in the hall for several moments. "Folks can't very often fool me on looks." Sarah nodded her head and set the curls to bobbing as she repeated, "Folks can't very often fool me on looks. The little girl is a sight like the old lady Danforth, but the boy is the very living image of her!"

CHAPTER VII

GRAY OWL SANTA CLAUS

"Sing, Christmas bells!
Sing to all men, — the bond, the free,
The rich, the poor, the high, the low,
The little child that sports in glee,
The aged folk that tottering go, —
Proclaim the morn
That Christ is born
That saveth them and saveth me!"

"Blessed are they who still dream and wonder and believe."

CHRISTMAS! Everything told it. The feeling of it was in the air. The snow which lay lightly and deeply upon ground and trees, the icicles which hung in long glittering pendants, the clear, bright blue sky, the brisk, lively, sunshiny cold, — all told of Christmas. The air was the Christmas air, stirring the heart-beats. The sounds were Christmas sounds, — the merry calling out of Christmas greetings, the glad ringing of the church bells.

The Christmas Makers' Club was all ready to enjoy Christmas day to the utmost. Mysterious packages for the Christmas-tree had arrived at

Mrs. Danforth's house all day Thursday and had been taken charge of by Cummings, the maid, who seemed suddenly to have forgotten her stiffness and to have become more like other people. The Club had held an important business meeting at Miss Ruth Warren's house Thursday afternoon and had made everything ready for the visit to the Convalescent Home on Christmas morning. The twenty-four dolls which the Club had dressed and the twelve rag-dolls of Mrs. Holt's making — which even Betty, who had scorned rag-dolls, declared were full prettier than the others — had been carefully placed in a large, flat basket. The paper dolls and the tin soldiers were in boxes by themselves, and the twelve tops which Ben had made were also ready to be given to the Convalescent children.

Elsa Danforth had told the Club that her Uncle Ned was very anxious to go to the Convalescent Home with them, and it had been decided that there would be plenty of room for him, also, in Ben's large double sleigh, as he could sit on the front seat with Ben and little Alice, while Miss Ruth, Betty and Elsa occupied the back seat.

Best of all, at this business meeting, the children had delivered to their Club president, Miss Ruth,

the united sum of five dollars and sixty cents which they had earned, in the past two weeks, to give to the managers of the Convalescent Home. There was one dollar and forty cents from Betty White, who had earned five cents a day for emptying waste paper baskets in her own home and for blacking her father's shoes — never were shoes better blacked, Mr. White declared, boastfully; there were two dollars from Elsa, whose Uncle Ned had paid her just as he promised he would for writing two letters each week, although he had been in Berkeley the past week, and who had also paid her a dollar for copying a long piece of writing for him; there were seventy cents from little Alice, earned by washing dishes for her mother; and, lastly, Ben, who had entered heartily in this plan for earning money, had given a dollar and a half as his share, earned by shovelling snow and doing errands for the neighbours. After considerable thinking, Ben had decided to give to his mother the whole amount of the three dollars and a half which Mr. Danforth had paid him for seven hours' help; and on Christmas morning Mrs. Holt had been deeply touched by the gift of money from her devoted little son.

Betty's dollar and forty cents, Elsa's two dollars,

Alice's seventy cents, and Ben's dollar and a half, made the good round sum of five dollars and sixty cents which the Club had earned for the Convalescent Home; and when the boy of the Club had handed the full amount in silver to the president, the Club members had felt well repaid for all their work by seeing her great surprise and delight.

"Nothing which you could have done would have pleased me more than this, children," Miss Ruth said warmly. "I know that the money will be a most welcome gift to the Convalescent Home and be ever so much help."

"Will the Club have its name printed?" Betty inquired anxiously.

"Yes, I am sure the managers of the Home will want to mention the name of the Club and the gift in their annual report," Miss Ruth answered.

"How will it sound, please?" Alice asked.

"Something like this: 'From the Christmas Makers' Club of Berkeley, $5.60; also dolls, tops, and toys.'"

"Perhaps it will interest other children to do things for the little Convalescings," Ben suggested.

"We are going to earn some more money for them when we have our Easter Club," Elsa said delightedly; "we must truly have that Easter Club!"

"Won't it be fun to see the little children at the Convalescent Home to-morrow morning when we give them all the things we have for them?" Betty cried out, enthusiastically, as the Club ended its important business meeting on Thursday afternoon, impatient for the next day to come.

And so on this bright morning of the glad Christmas day, Ben drove around to Washington Avenue at the appointed hour. He had washed the sleigh and brushed Jerry until both fairly shone, and had given the old horse some extra oats. Alice was perched up beside her brother on the front seat, looking the picture of rosy-cheeked happiness.

First of all, Ben stopped at the Danforth house, to call for Elsa and her uncle. Meanwhile, Betty, who had been watching for the arrival of the sleigh, came running out from her own home, with her brown hair and her blue capes flying, to wish the twins a "Merry Christmas!" first; so she jumped into the back seat of the sleigh without waiting to be called for. Mr. Danforth helped Elsa into the back seat, and then walked the short distance to the Warren house, for Miss Ruth was the only one now remaining to join the party.

But at Miss Ruth's house a great disappointment

awaited the Club, and all on account of Miss Virginia Warren.

Miss Virginia's cold was better, but her nervousness had greatly increased. She had never in her life had a trained nurse, and much as she wanted one to take care of her and wait upon her, she felt that it might prove so exciting as to have a very bad effect upon her, especially at first. It had been arranged that Bettina March should arrive at noon on Christmas day; and Ruth Warren would be back from the Convalescent Home an hour before that time. But Miss Virginia had decided that she could not possibly stay alone that morning, nor have anybody except her niece, not even Sarah Judd, stay with her.

From breakfast time on, Miss Virginia grew more and more uneasy. At last, just before it was time for Ruth to put on her coat and be ready to start with the Club, Miss Virginia began crying and wringing her large white hands.

"I am sorry, Ruth, to have you give up going to the Convalescent Home with the children," Aunt Virginia said, tearfully, "but I don't feel well enough to have you leave me. You know we are all supposed to be happier by making Christmas

happier for somebody else, so I am sure you will be glad to stay with me." Miss Virginia looked up at her niece with a very helpless and resigned expression. Her tears had ceased, but she kept on wringing her hands in a limp way.

Ruth Warren was keenly disappointed. She knew that her aunt could stay alone for an hour perfectly well; but she could not go with any pleasure now, after her aunt had asked her to stay at home.

When the merry sleighful stopped in front of the house, Ruth Warren herself answered the ring at the front door in order not to delay the party. Mr. Danforth had told Ben that he would call for Miss Warren and bring out the basket and boxes, so that Ben might stay in the sleigh and hold Jerry, who, Ben said, might feel extra lively on Christmas morning and run away with his precious load!

Accordingly, when Ruth Warren opened the door, there stood before her Elsa's tall, broad-shouldered uncle with clear gray eyes, steady in an open, moustached face, who looked squarely at her while he said with almost a boy's earnestness:

"Merry Christmas, Miss Warren! Your Club is at the door. Are you and the Christmas presents ready to start for the Convalescents' Home?"

"Here are the basket and boxes, Mr. Danforth," she said, for she had them close by the door. Leaving him to bring them, she threw her red cape over her shoulders and ran down the steps to the curbstone to tell the Club that she could not go with them on account of her Aunt Virginia.

A prolonged wail of grief went up from the Club.

"We can't go without you!" cried Elsa, her violet-gray eyes filling with tears.

"Please, *please* come," entreated Betty, jumping out of the sleigh. "I will go and ask your aunt to let you."

"But it is I who decide it, not my aunt," Ruth Warren said. "You will have Mr. Danforth with you, and the head-nurse expects you, and you are only to stay a short time. You will get along just as well without me."

"But we want you!" wailed the Club. "It won't be any fun without you;" and they would not be consoled.

"Please do come, Black Lace Lady!" urged

"'BUT WE WANT YOU!' WAILED THE CLUB."

Ben in his most persuasive tone, while Alice, leaning far over the edge of the sleigh at the great risk of falling out, echoed "Please" most pleadingly.

It was hard indeed to resist their urgent begging, but Miss Ruth said steadily: "It will soon be over, and after all, children, your having thought of the presents for the Convalescent children means far more than the giving of the presents."

Still the Club refused consolation. "We just won't go without you," said Betty passionately, kicking the snow with the toe of her rubber. "I will not get back into the sleigh."

By this time Mr. Danforth, who realized what was going on, had the basket and boxes packed under the sleigh seats.

"But I want you to go, children," Ruth Warren was urging.

"The Club must do as its president wishes," Mr. Danforth said quickly, now that everything was ready. "All clubs do that, — or at least they ought to. You must honour your president by carrying out her wishes." With this, he settled the question by lifting Betty into the back seat of the sleigh, jumping in after her, and saying to Ben:

"Start along, sir, or we shall be late to our appointment. Do you think Jerry can take us out there in fifteen minutes?"

This settled it. Ben said, "G'long, Jerry!" The well-brushed horse started off briskly, the reluctant children looking backward as long as they could to see Miss Ruth standing there on the curbstone.

The thoughts which those disappointed children had, even on Christmas morning, about Miss Virginia were not very pleasant thoughts. How much of Miss Virginia's feelings on that same morning were due to nervousness, and how much to a desire not to have her beloved niece drive out again in that old, country-like pung no one yet knows. It is true, however, that Miss Virginia said when Ruth came back up-stairs: "I am wholly surprised that such a distinguished-looking gentleman as Mr. Danforth could be willing to go off in that sleigh and with that crowd of children."

Elsa's Uncle Ned tried his best to cheer the spirits of the Club. He told funny stories, he praised Ben's horse, he gave them mysterious hints of what would take place at the Christmas-tree that afternoon — although he did not actually tell them

a thing — and finally, by the time they were opposite the Holt's sunny, flowery-windowed house, he had succeeded somewhat in making the children forget their disappointment.

Then it was that Mr. Danforth himself grew suddenly grave and thoughtful as he asked Ben to stop for a moment while he delivered a message from Mrs. Danforth to Mrs. Holt.

This did not seem anything very important, and the children waited more patiently than the horse did, in front of his home.

But the message must have been one which affected Mrs. Holt greatly; for when Ben and Alice looked, as they always did when they drove away, to see their mother wave to them from the window, she was not there. Could they have seen her at that moment, they would have been amazed to see her leaning against the mantel with her hands over her face, weeping softly at the message which Mr. Danforth had brought.

They would have been still more amazed could they have been at the front door of their own home a few moments later, when Mrs. Danforth's coupé, drawn by the spirited gray horse, drove up to that door and Mrs. Danforth herself dismounted.

Most amazed of all would they have been when

their mother opened the door, to hear her exclaim, "Mother!" and throw her arms around Mrs. Danforth, and to hear the tall, white-faced woman crying, "My daughter, my daughter!" as the fair-haired younger woman led her into the house and shut the door.

The rest of the short distance to the Convalescent Home was spent chiefly in talking about Miss Ruth and the Club's plans for the future. "Are we going to have a meeting next week?" Elsa inquired of Betty, who knew Miss Ruth best.

"I don't know, I'm sure," was Betty's discouraging answer. "Mother said Miss Ruth told her she was going away after New Year's for a visit, somewhere."

Fresh gloom settled over the Club at this. Mr. Danforth was in despair with having such unhappy children upon his hands. But Ben came to his rescue, for a gray squirrel whisking along the stone wall suggested something to Ben's mind. Turning around, he told Mr. Danforth about carrying the squirrel to the Club meeting one day. "It didn't frighten Miss Ruth a bit," Ben ended earnestly; "she's got grit, the way I like to have a girl."

Fom talking about the squirrel Ben went on to tell Mr. Danforth of the screech-owl family which had lived in the hollow tree near there last spring. "I think maybe they will come back here again," he said hopefully, "and maybe we can see them from the hut."

"What hut?" asked Mr. Danforth very innocent-like, although he and Ben had been to the hut together more than once now.

Ben gave a chuckle which he turned into a "G'long, Jerry!" and Elsa cried, "Why, Uncle Ned, you know all about the hut! I have told you."

A moment later they passed the hospitable sign:

CONVALESCENT HOME
OF THE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL
VISITORS ALWAYS WELCOME

and the sleigh-bells jingled merrily up the avenue to the wide-winged red brick building.

The kind face of the head-nurse fairly shone with happiness when she saw the basketful of dolls and all the boxes. "I have just told the children that you were coming," she said, "and one little boy is sure he heard the reindeers driving to the

house. I think he is looking for you to come down the chimney, — though you could never get so many things as these down even our big chimney, at once! After you have given them the presents, they are going to sing for you the carol they have learned for their Christmas-tree, on Holy Innocents' Day. We will go right out to the playroom, so as not to keep you or them waiting a moment."

The children visitors all knew the way to the playroom now. Ben and Alice went first, with the big basket of dolls between them, followed by the head-nurse and Betty, Elsa and her uncle, each carrying a box, Mr. Danforth's the largest of all, for Ben had brought out from under the front seat of the sleigh, a square box which the other members of the Club had not seen before.

The sunny playroom was decked with Christmas greens, and the little convalescents had a holiday air, for each girl wore a bright red ribbon on her hair and each boy either a bright red necktie or a bit of red ribbon in his buttonhole. There were, just as before, many, many bandaged limbs and bodies, and many children on crutches or lying in go-carts; there were the same happy patient expressions on the children's faces, only to-day, their faces were lighted up with the excitement of

Christmas and with eager interest in the presents they were to receive.

The nurses, the Club, and Mr. Danforth, all helped quickly to distribute the gifts, and it was not long before every little girl in the room was hugging a new doll and every little boy was admiring a new top, or a tin soldier large enough to stand alone; and then there was another present for each one of the children; for out of Mr. Danforth's box came dozens of gray squirrel-shaped boxes filled with simple candy, — until the great playroom looked as if a forestful of tiny, tame gray squirrels had been let loose there.

It was a wholly new experience to Mr. Ned Danforth to see all these little patient, crippled human beings. Like many busy men in the world, he had been in the habit of signing his name to a check and sending it to this or that hospital or charitable institution which he was asked to help. But this was the first time in his life that he had ever stepped inside such a place as the Convalescent Home; and at first it seemed to him that he could not bear the sight, that almost forty years old as he was, he would have to run away like a schoolboy, because the sight of those convalescent children made him feel so sad. But he could not run away; he was

there in charge of the Christmas Makers' Club. So all he could do to relieve his feelings was to put his hand into his pocket where he always kept a great many five-cent and ten-cent pieces, — being a generous-natured man, — and begin giving these pieces of money to the children.

So he started to walk very fast through the playroom, dropping into the hands or the laps of the children five-cent pieces, ten-cent pieces, pennies, silver quarter-dollars, even half-dollars, here and there, right and left, as long as they lasted. And the nurses, in great fear lest the little children put the money into their mouths and swallow it, followed closely after him, taking the money away from the surprised children, who were so used to being obedient that they gave it up without any fuss, and kind-hearted Uncle Ned did not know what was happening behind him.

Ben and Alice, Betty and Elsa were all too much occupied to notice, either. Ben was surrounded by a group of his own particular little friends, the boys whom he took out driving; Alice and Betty were coaxing shy little girls to talk about their new dolls, and Elsa had found out the black-eyed child in whose arms she had seen her own old china doll, Bettina, on her first visit here.

The child's frame was strapped to a board, just as Elsa had seen it before; but she called out cheerily: "I am all better! See my new dolly!" On the floor by her side lay the old doll, so battered and changed that only one who had loved her as Elsa had would have recognized her.

Elsa picked up the old doll tenderly, saying to herself: "I will hold her till the little girl remembers and wants her." "What is your new doll's name?" she asked the child.

"'Tina."

"What is the old doll's name?" Elsa held the battered doll out in plain sight.

"'Tina," said the little girl, reaching out for the old doll and blissfully clasping the old and the new together in her arms.

"And what is your own name, dear?" asked Elsa, for the dark-eyed child interested her greatly.

"Iona," the soft voice answered very distinctly.

"Come, come, Elsa! It is time to start," her Uncle Ned said, hurrying up to her and trying to be very gruff. His face was quite red under its tanned colour, and he was biting the ends of his moustache savagely.

But just then, at a signal from the head-nurse, the children began to sing their Christmas carol:

"Once in royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby,
In a manger for his bed;
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child.

"For he is our childhood's pattern;
Day by day like us he grew;
He was little, weak, and helpless,
Tears and smiles like us he knew;
And he feeleth for our sadness,
And he shareth in our gladness.

"And our eyes at last shall see him,
Through his own redeeming love;
For that child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above,
And he leads his children on
To the place where he is gone."

Then, because they were such frail little children that they could not learn much or readily, they sang as the other part of their Christmas service, their daily grace:

"Thank Him, thank Him,
All ye little children,
Thank Him, thank Him,
God is love."

The plaintive child faces, some of them white as snow-drops, the delicate, sweet voices singing the Christmas hymn and the simple grace, proved too much for Uncle Ned's tender heart. "We must

go, we must go this minute!" he exclaimed hurriedly calling the Club together and fairly driving them out of the room, before him.

Elsa looked back long enough to say good-bye to the dark-eyed child of her fancy, and the little one called cheerily: "Dood-bye. I am all better! Tum aden."

The head-nurse followed the retreating man and the hurrying children along the passageway toward the front door with a very understanding look on her face.

"Have we stayed too long?" Elsa inquired anxiously, stopping behind the others and lifting her serious eyes to Miss Hartwell's face.

"No, dear; there are still a few moments left of the time I had set for your little Club to stay."

Elsa did not tell this to the other children or to her uncle. Already, however, she had learned what her uncle did not yet know, but what he learned later: that while the first visit to the Convalescent Home is saddening, each time after that the place grows more and more interesting and less sad to visit.

At the door Mr. Ned Danforth turned and shook hands briskly with the head-nurse.

"Splendid place here!" he said, again very gruf-

fly. "Noble work you are doing! Thank you for your kindness to us." Then he thrust a large-sized bill into her hand, saying in a desperate sort of way, "Use it to do something more for those children!"

And Ben suddenly remembered the small white box containing five dollars and sixty cents which he had in his pocket. He pulled it forth and handed it to Miss Hartwell with a profound bow: "It is some money that the Christmas Makers' Club — that's us — have earned all ourselves to help the little Convalescings."

"Thank you, thank you, all of you," said Miss Hartwell, looking from one to another of the bright-faced children. "I am sure you cannot realize how much help you have given to the children here and to the Home."

Too delighted for words, the Club members smiled back at Miss Hartwell.

She hesitated about speaking of Miss Ruth Warren, for Mr. Danforth had told her, when they first came, of the Club's tearful tendencies. It was not until the children were going through the doorway that she said: "You are as heartily sorry as I am, I know, because Miss Warren could not come with you; but we shall look forward to other visits

from your Club when the longer days of spring are here."

The faces of the children showed their mingled grief and anticipation expressively; they were speechless, however, on the subject of Miss Ruth.

"May I take some of the little chaps out sleigh-riding to-morrow morning?" asked Ben, a heartful of sympathy shining in his boyish face.

"Yes, Ben; and you don't know how those little lads look forward to their drives with you. We shall have to call you the Charioteer of the Convalescent Home," said Miss Hartwell.

Then, as the door closed behind them, Mr. Danforth speedily bundled the Club into the sleigh for the homeward drive.

When they turned into Berkeley Avenue, Elsa thought she caught a sight, far ahead, of her grandmother's gray horse; but she decided it could not have been, because her grandmother almost never went driving in the morning, and she surely would not be away from home when there was so much to see about in regard to the Christmas-tree. Even Elsa herself did not know what all the surprises were to be, although she knew that many wonderful things were going to happen that Christmas afternoon.

That afternoon, the surprises came so fast and so astonishingly that the heads of the Christmas Makers' Club and of all concerned fairly whirled with excitement.

To begin with, Ben and Alice thought it strange indeed that Mrs. Danforth's gray horse and handsome double-seated sleigh were sent to take their mother and them to the Christmas party.

"Why couldn't we go with Jerry just as well?" Ben asked loyally. "I could cover him all up with his blanket and hitch him in front of Elsa's grandmother's house."

But Mrs. Holt only smiled for answer. The children had found their mother very bright-eyed, on their return, and she had been more than usually tender with them, but had told them nothing as yet.

"Do you think Elsa's grandmother will let us drive home, or will we have to walk?" Alice asked gravely.

"I think she will have us drive home," said Mrs. Holt, turning aside to hide the happy tears that would spring into her eyes. She had dressed Alice in her prettiest white dress, — a soft muslin with dainty lace-trimmed ruffles, — and Ben wore for the first time a new dark blue blouse suit; for Mrs.

Holt was anxious to have her children look their best that afternoon.

"Mrs. Danforth would like to see you all in the library, ma'am," said Cummings, who opened the door. The twins wondered very much why their mother's hands trembled so. It could not be because she was afraid of that straight-backed maid-servant who took their wraps and who smiled at them quite pleasantly. Elsa was nowhere to be seen, which surprised them.

In the centre of the library stood Mrs. Danforth, not quite so erect as usual, and with one hand on a chair, to support herself. She bowed her head and her figure swayed slightly when Mrs. Holt entered the room, with Ben just ahead of her on the right and Alice on the left.

"Mother, — here are my children, Alice and Ben," Mrs. Holt said in a low voice which sounded as if there were tears behind it, "and, children dear," — she pressed them gently forward, — "this is your own grandmother."

Mrs. Danforth knelt down suddenly and put her arms around both of the mystified children, looking first into one and then the other of the amazed, blue-eyed faces. She tried to speak, but something choked her.

"Let me tell them, mother," said Mrs. Holt, helping her to rise and leading her to a chair. "I have always promised them I would tell them, some day, about their grandmother." Kneeling down, herself, now, by the side of the chair, and drawing the children into her embrace, Mrs. Holt said in the same tear-sounding voice and very slowly: "Listen, children: when I was hardly more than a grown-up girl, I ran away from my home and married your father against my mother's wishes, for he was a poor man, and he, too, was hardly old enough to be married. And because I was a disobedient daughter, my mother punished me by not wanting to see me for a long, long time. That time is ended now and —" Mrs. Holt hid her face and her tears against her own little daughter's shoulder.

Then Mrs. Danforth found her voice and said: "Dear children, your grandmother has been a sorry, sad woman all these years that she tried to punish her daughter, but she is happy — very happy now — to have her daughter back again and her own grandchildren."

"Are you our grandmother?" Alice asked shyly, staring with wide-open blue eyes at the gray-haired

lady who said such interesting things and seemed so sorry.

"Yes, darling," was the grandmotherly answer. "And you look just as your mother looked when she was a little girl."

"You are really and truly my grandmother?" asked Ben in a delighted tone, although he could not stop thinking how surprising it was that his mother had ever been a little girl, and had been punished.

"Yes. Are you going to love me?" Mrs. Danforth was astonished at herself for asking.

For particular answer, Ben threw his arms around her neck. "It's going to be real easy for me to love you," he said happily. Then he drew back and looked at her, seriously, before he announced: "I think I shall call you Grandmother Gray."

"That is a very good name, my boy," she said, smiling through the joyful tears that had sprung into her eyes at the feeling of his loving young arms around her neck; and her glasses fell off her nose like any grandmother's.

"Is Elsa our cousin now?" asked Ben, who was always of an inquiring turn of mind.

"No, my dear," replied his grandmother, brush-

ing back his hair with her richly jewelled hand; "and I will tell you why. After your own grandfather died and after your mother went away, I married a widower, Judge Danforth, who had two sons. One of those sons was Elsa's father and the other is her Uncle Ned, whom you know. After Judge Danforth died, and Elsa's father also, I moved to Berkeley, because I knew that your mother was here, and I could not live any longer without seeing her and my grandchildren. Elsa is no real relation to me at all."

Alice, who was holding her mother's hand closely in hers while all these wonderful things were going on, looked wholly puzzled; but Ben thrust his hands into the pockets of his new trousers, — jingled the two silver quarters he had earned by helping Mr. Danforth an hour that morning, after the drive, — and said thoughtfully: "Then Elsa hasn't you for a real grandmother. Does she know it?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Danforth; "I told her after she came from the Convalescent Home this morning.

"I am all the gladder she is going to have Susie!" cried Alice; then she quickly clapped her rounded hand over her mouth.

But Ben had more questions to ask, so he did

not notice that Alice had told. "Are you very rich, Grandmother Gray?"

"Yes," she answered, rather surprised that the boy should ask this.

"Will you give Peggy — I mean Alice — some pretty dresses, same as Elsa and Betty have?"

"Yes, my boy, Alice shall have everything she wants and so shall you."

Alice put her chubby hands together softly, in almost unbelieving joy, and Ben said radiantly: "What I want most of all is that mother of mine need not work hard any more."

A look of great sorrow passed over Mrs. Danforth's face, and Mrs. Holt whispered to Ben: "Hush, my darling."

The front door-bell ringing, told of the arrival of other guests. "We must call Elsa in for a moment," said Mrs. Danforth, rising. Her eyes were soft now, with that look of tears in them. Stepping to the library door, she said gently, "Elsa!" And Elsa, who had been waiting in the reception-room across the hall, came into the library just as Ruth Warren and Betty and a quiet little woman — whom Cummings instantly recognized — entered the hall door and were asked by Cummings to go up-stairs and leave their wraps.

Elsa was dressed in a dainty white silk gown with a full, many-ruffled skirt. She looked very pale as she stepped into the library and stood, a lone, sensitive-faced child, opposite the happy group of grandmother, mother, and two children.

It was Elsa, strangely enough, who spoke first. Turning to Alice, she said slowly: "You — you and Ben have a grandmother now and I haven't any. Shall I have to go away," she asked, lifting her pathetic eyes to Mrs. Danforth's face, "and be a poor little girl?" She had just begun to think of this question.

"You need never go away unless you wish to, Elsa," Mrs. Danforth said quickly. "And you will not be a poor little girl, for, as your Uncle Ned and I have agreed that I should tell you to-day, you are a very rich little girl, with a great deal of money that is all your own."

"O, how glad I am!" cried Elsa, some of the sorrowful look dying out of her eyes; "for now I can do everything I want to, to help the Convalescent children."

There was something so touching and so winning in the little orphan girl, standing there with her face full of unselfish joy at the thought of what she could do for others less fortunate than

herself, that Mrs. Danforth suddenly humbled herself before this little child.

"Elsa," she said, stepping forward, "I have not been as kind and loving to you as I might have been. But the love which springs up in my heart for my own grandchildren makes me realize how much I also love the little girl who has brightened my home and been so brave and obedient." She held out her arms. Elsa came forward gladly, and Mrs. Danforth kissed her with warm affection, — apparently quite forgetting that she had ever thought this a foolish custom. And Elsa felt that she loved her grandmother-that-was a great deal more dearly now that she wasn't really her grandmother. Then Alice put her soft arms around Elsa's neck, and Mrs. Holt said kindly: "I shall have to call you my little niece, Elsa."

Ben spoke up then: "Do you remember I've never told you my name for you, Elsa? I've changed it now. It used to be Sad Girl, that's why I didn't tell you before; but now it's going to be 'Princess.'" Dropping a shy kiss on Elsa's golden hair, Ben ran off in answer to a muffled summons.

At that same moment Cummings pulled back the heavy green velvet portières which separated the

library from the drawing-room, and the glory of the Christmas-tree burst upon the children's sight.

The tree, reaching nearly to the ceiling, stood at the farther end of the long drawing-room, its graceful branches fairly drooping with treasures. There were packages of every shape and description; there were long icicles, moving, swaying balls of silver and gold, scarlet and blue, glowing and sparkling in the mellow radiance of many wax candles; and there was a beautiful white Christmas angel at the very top of the tree. A warm, spicy odour of balsam fir filled the air, and a splendid, roaring fire in the great fireplace cast a ruddy light over the beautiful furnishings of the drawing-room.

Elsa, puzzled and excited by the events of the day, ran forward to greet Miss Ruth with a feeling as of seeking shelter. "Do you know that grandmother isn't my grandmother really, but is Alice's and Ben's?" she said in a low tone, slipping her hand into Miss Ruth's.

Ruth Warren, who had on the black lace gown with the little old lady's coral beads around her neck, gazed in surprise at Elsa for a half moment. Then it was all so simple that she wondered why she had not thought of Mrs. Danforth's possibly

having been twice married. "We know now why both your grandmother — I mean Mrs. Danforth — and Mrs. Holt have the paintings alike," said Miss Ruth.

"Yes, I remember — the picture of the house where grandmother used to live," cried Elsa.

But one could not stop very long to think about any one thing, with that Christmas-tree in the room.

"I wish my Uncle Ned could be here," Elsa exclaimed, as she swung around into sight of the tree. "He had to go to the city this noon. Perhaps he will come back before the tree is over. He said he would if he could."

While Betty and Alice were gazing delightedly at the gorgeous tree, Miss Ruth asked Elsa, in a low voice, to go across the hall into the reception-room to find a Christmas surprise which was waiting for her there. And soon Elsa came back with shining, happy eyes, leading by the hand a short, comely-faced woman whose brown hair was slightly streaked with gray. "This is Bettina March, my dear, dear Bettina," said Elsa, introducing the shy, modest little woman to the group of her friends; but Bettina, although she greeted them all in a musical voice, with a slight German accent, had eyes only for her beloved former charge, Elsa.

"Where is Ben?" asked Ruth Warren, in part to turn attention from the shrinking stranger, who was half-laughing, half-crying with joy, and in part because she was wondering who would take the presents from the tree.

Then an amazing thing happened. With a long hoo-oo-t! a great gray owl hopped, sidling fashion, from the library doorway into the full sight of the astonished Christmas party, flapping his wings awkwardly as he made his way across the room to the Christmas-tree. And close behind him scampered a very large gray squirrel.

A shout went up from the children.

"Gray Owl Santa Claus!" cried Betty, whirling round and round till she looked like a red balloon in her holly-red dress.

Alice, half frightened, drew away from the Gray Owl toward the Squirrel. "Ben is the Squirrel," she exclaimed, for nothing could deceive her with regard to her twin brother.

"Keep a good heart!" the Gray Owl called out in a quick, muffled voice, close to Elsa's ear.

"O, Uncle Ned, Uncle Ned!" she cried delightedly. "You came back to be a Gray Owl Santa Claus! What a dear, funny uncle you are."

Then the Gray Owl, with sudden, awkward

movements, began taking the presents off from the tree and handing them to the Gray Squirrel, who clasped his paws around them and carried them to the persons whose names the Owl had called in a deep, muffled voice.

And then it was that the Club had a chance to see the marvellous costumes of the queer Santa Claus and his helper. The Gray Owl's body-covering was of soft gray wool material which lay in ridges like downy feathers; the wings, which were held to his arms by long sleeves of gray gauze, were made of closely placed long gray feathers and quills, and his head was covered by a gray owl mask, with tufted ears and yellow eyes having thin black slits. The squirrel had on a most cleverly made coat of soft gray wool shaded to purest white on the breast; a bristly, broom-like tail dragged behind him, and a pointed-nosed mask with sharp little ears, was drawn close over his head.

By this time every one had received many presents, and a great opening of packages had begun. The Club members had thought of most interesting remembrances for one another. Elsa and Betty had together given Alice a beautiful doll that could talk, a blue-eyed waxen beauty with fringed eyelashes that opened and shut, rose-leaf cheeks and silky

flaxen curls; and the two girls had given to Ben a locomotive with an electric battery, — a bewitching package which he stopped long enough to open with his deft gray squirrel paws, and to cry out about, in his unsquirrel-like voice: "Oh, my, how jolly!" Alice and Ben had together given to Betty and to Elsa each a beautiful white hyacinth. Elsa had from Betty a trunkful of dresses for her best doll, and Betty from Elsa a dainty silver watch. From Miss Ruth, Ben had a box of tools, and each of the girls a gold thimble.

Still the Gray Owl kept on taking presents from the tree, the Squirrel jumped around with packages, and the fun went on. Nobody was forgotten. There were presents for Bettina, who ran away soon to Miss Virginia, after a last loving look at Elsa; there were presents for Miss Ruth and Mrs. Holt, for Mrs. Danforth and for Mrs. White, who came in somewhat late to have a look at her neighbour's Christmas-tree. There were presents for Mr. Danforth, who tucked them away in some mysterious make-believe Gray Owl tree-hollow; for Cummings, and for Sarah Judd, who came by special invitation of the Club, and who smiled until her face seemed in danger of cracking apart, as she received first a bright scarlet geranium from Ben

and Alice, then a pretty white apron from Betty, and a handsomely illustrated book from Elsa.

When the Squirrel, taking a square package, ran with little leaping steps to Mrs. Danforth and began making a speech, everybody stopped talking to listen.

"Grandmother Gray," he said, "when you invited the Club to have a Christmas-tree at your house, I had an idea that you must be very rich, and I thought you must need a good safe place to keep your money in, so I made this for you."

Mrs. Danforth, with trembling fingers, like any surprised grandmother, unwrapped the package to find a box, neatly jointed together, with the lower part just large enough to put bills in laid out flat, and the upper part divided into five places, — one, each, for pennies, five-cent pieces, ten-cent pieces, quarters and half-dollars, as Ben, looking on, explained. The box was stained a rich, dark red colour, and had a tiny padlock and key.

"Nonsense!" said the grandmother in greatest delight. "Did you make this, Ben?"

"Yes, grandmother; I used to think I would be a carpenter," replied Ben, as she took his two gray kid-gloved little hands into hers for a moment. "I think now, though, that I shall be a bird-man."

Then, just like any fond, indulgent grandmother, Mrs. Danforth smiled and said: "You shall be whatever you want to be, my boy." And Mrs. Holt looked with motherly pride upon her bright-eyed, happy-faced son.

While the box was being passed around and admired and the Squirrel was explaining it, the Gray Owl hopped in his funny sidelong fashion, with awkward, flopping wings, to Alice — who was not afraid of him now — and asked her to give to Elsa a long white box marked: "From the Christmas Makers' Club."

"Susie! Susie! You dear old doll," Elsa cried, drawing a long, sobbing breath of delight. They all turned at her exclamation and saw her clasping to her breast an old-fashioned china doll in a white ball dress looped up with morsels of pink rosebuds over a blue silk petticoat.

But there was no time even to explain to Elsa why the Club had given her the old-fashioned doll, for another exciting event claimed their attention immediately. The Gray Owl and the Squirrel together took a heavy, flat package to Miss Ruth, who had already received so many remembrances that she was far from having thoughts of anything more. The Club watched breathlessly. This was

the present which Mrs. White had helped them choose.

From under many white-paper wrappings appeared at last a beautiful Fra Angelico trumpeter angel, soft, rich, scarlet-and-gold in colouring, in a handsome gilt frame. With the picture came a card, on which Betty had written with great carefulness: "An angel to blow you a greeting from your affectionate Christmas Makers' Club." And to this card all the members of the Club had signed their names.

Hardly had Miss Ruth had time to thank the Club, when the Gray Owl handed to Elsa a long, white business-like looking envelope addressed to "Miss Ruth Warren, President of the Christmas Makers' Club." The excitement of Elsa's manner made the others look on again with keenest interest.

What was their delight and rapture to have Miss Ruth read a legal paper, presenting to the Club, from Elsa Danforth, the gift, for the exclusive use of the Club, of a log-hut on a certain piece of wood property on Berkeley Avenue.

"The hut! The hut! All our own!" cried Betty, whirling around again like a lively red balloon. And then they all began talking at once and very fast about furnishing the hut, of keeping some

dolls and dishes there, even of having a fireplace built so they could use the hut for meetings in cold weather!

Elsa, whose thought this gift of the hut had been — although her Uncle Ned had carried it out, with Ben's help — stood enjoying to the full the happiness of the Club, when suddenly, with a long, low hoo-oo-t! the Gray Owl, flapping his wings, landed in front of her. Bowing low, he said: "Princess, the Gray Owl begs that you will allow him to live with you here, in Berkeley, from this time forth."

"Uncle Ned! Do you really mean it?" she begged, lifting her flower-like face and beseeching gray eyes to his.

"Yes, the Gray Owl really means it. He will not be a cross Gray Owl, though, so keep a good heart, Princess," he answered, making believe he thought she did not want him to live with her, for he had seen tears start under her long eyelashes. Then, because he knew that many exciting things had happened to his little niece that day, he drew her toward him and held her under the shelter of his soft gray wings.

Of all the surprises that Christmas had brought to Elsa, this last one was the best. It was far more

than the knowledge that she had a great deal of money even though she was happy in the thought that she could help the convalescent children with that money; it was more than the great satisfaction of having Bettina March come back into her life, more than the gift of the little old lady's doll and all the many other Christmas presents put together: — more than all these; for she loved her Uncle Ned better than she loved anybody else in the whole wide world. And she drew back within the shelter of the wide wings in supreme content.

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